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MY LOVE

E. LYNN LINTON

"MY LOVE!"

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"MY LOVE!"

BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF "PATRICIA KEMBALL," "THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS,"
"UNDER WHICH LORD?" "THE REBEL OF THE FAMILY," ETC.

A NEW EDITION

London
CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1882

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"MY LOVE!"

CHAPTER I.

IN THE MORNING.

It was a foolish thing to do; but when was happy youth aught but foolish? And he was so happy! so happy! He could not find fitting vent for his joy, nor adequate expression by which to inform the world at large how great was his divine delight. Waking up to consciousness in the dawn of that sweet spring morning—full of blessed certainty and still more blessed anticipation—seeing neither rock nor shallow ahead and sure that no storm could come to wreck his well-freighted bark—young as the year, bright as the sky, hopeful as the day, he looked out on the fair English landscape of fruitful farm and sleeping village, of fragrant meadow and leafy wood; and for want of some one to whom he could say how good and beautiful she was, and how his happiness seemed to fill earth and sky with radiance, he took off his diamond ring—her gift—and scrawled over the pane of the railway carriage: "My Love! my Love!"

What a boyish thing to do! But it relieved his mind somehow, and stood as the testimony of her worth and his passion, like the verses hung by Orlando on the trees, the name carved by Corydon on the bark. "My Love! my Love!" Ah, what a sweet Love she was! Never since the world began—never since Eve bent over her sleeping lord to awaken him to life and happiness with a kiss—had there been such a perfect woman as this! How true and faithful she was!—how loving and how pure! And how sure his happiness in this coming summer when he was to be made her husband as he was now her betrothed! How he loved her!—and how she loved him!

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It was not vanity to say this; it was only trust in his word, confidence in her assurance.

"My Love! my Love!"

What man on all the earth had such a Love as he, Cyril Ponsonby, in Stella Branscombe!—the sweetest name and the sweetest girl to be found within the four seas. No king on his throne was so proud as this embryo civil servant who had passed his examination creditably and was now waiting for his Indian appointment; no miser counting his golden gains in his secret chamber was so rich as this only son of a ruined house, this young soldier of fortune whose inherited income was just one hundred and fifty pounds a year;—with potentialities of a noble sort in his youth, his strength and his brains—but for all that, potentialities as yet in the bud if not in the clouds. He whose future was all to make would not have changed places with the most successful man alive; and the grandest glory of the historic past faded before the glowing splendour of his present. He felt in himself something that was almost beyond the ordinary circumstance of a man—as if neither death nor evil fortune could touch him—as if he had conquered fate, distanced sorrow, and was now standing with the gods on the sublime heights of infinite bliss:—all because he loved sweet Stella Branscombe and she loved him.

"My Love! my Love! God bless her! and God make me worthy of her!" he said to himself, while his frank blue eyes grew dark and tender and his handsome face was touched with something more than even the deep love of a happy boy.

And with this prayer, which seemed to carry both his love and his joy to heaven there to be strengthened and purified, the train ground slowly up to Highwood Station and Cyril leaped lightly out. It was past five o'clock:—about four hours to wait before a visit to Rose Hill, where the Branscombes lived, was possible even for an engaged man to make. But to one impatient and in love, it is better to travel all night and wait those four hours on the right side of the line, than to go to bed like an ordinary mortal and come down by the morning mail—better a thousand times to lose a night's rest and undergo unnecessary fatigue than to forego two hours of love and gain six of repose!

Long before the house servants of Rose Hill had begun to stir, Cyril and the gardener were having an improving talk as to the prospects of the fruit crop and the general behaviour

of the vegetables. Bruce, the big watch-dog, loosed for his morning run, was licking the young lover's hands and trying hard to take in his face as well. Jim, the groom, was telling him all about the pony and her foal, the new cob and the new mare, and how he did not quite like the set of his ears nor the way in which she carried her head; but when the first clatter of opening shutters began at the house, the young fellow, half ashamed of his impatience, went off to the summer-house at the end of the lime-tree walk, whence he could see the upper windows and where he should hear the gong sound for breakfast. And then, sure of his welcome, he would be free to walk in on the family just as they had seated themselves at the table. Besides its convenience of position, this little summer-house was a sacred place to him; for it was here that he had told Stella he loved her and had asked her to be his wife, and it was here that she had said she loved him and would marry him if papa and mamma approved.

How long it was before he heard the blessed boom of that old bit of Chinese handicraft! Surely time never went so slowly as it was going now! Leadenfooted, do you say?—paralyzed and with no more feet than a snail!—that was what he seemed to Cyril counting the minutes as they dropped heavily into the great sea of eternity and making them all the slower by his own eager heat.

At last the appointed moment came. Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe were in the dining-room; Stella was running down the stairs; the omelette and the kidneys, the tea and the coffee, the toast and the marmalade, were fitly disposed in proper form on the cloth; the solemn butler sounded the gong and told the neighbourhood within earshot that Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe were served; and then Cyril started up from his seat in the summer-house and walked swiftly up the lime-tree avenue, timing his entrance just as the first cup of coffee was handed to Mr. Branscombe and the business of the day had begun.

The young fellow was evidently a favourite in the family and one to whom a special length of rope was allowed. Not only was Stella radiant with glad surprise at his coming so long before he was expected—not only was gentle Mrs. Branscombe as frank and affectionate in her welcome as if he had been really the son he already called himself—but Mr. Branscombe, whose humour was the true weather-gauge at Rose Hill, smiled as complacently at the rest and did not look

displeased at this interruption to his breakfast. Wherefore Jones, the butler, who, as a rule, resented domestic derangements and surprises as in some sense personal affronts, but who followed his master's line to a hair, smiled too as he ushered in Mr. Ponsonby and scanned each face of the family while seeming to see and notice nothing.

"Sit down, boy, sit down! What will you take? Jones, a plate for Mr. Ponsonby," said Mr. Branscombe, as he gave Cyril two long, white, scented fingers, his manner deprecating unnecessary fuss.

On the hint of that manner both Mrs. Branscombe and Stella acted; each doing her best to look and speak as if it were the most natural thing in the world that Cyril should walk in from London to breakfast, when he was not expected before twelve at the earliest; and as if a girl's love and a mother's sympathy desired no warmer expression than a man's half-indifferent welcome and more than tepid acquiescence in things as they stood.

On that hint too Cyril acted, with more instinctive than conscious perception of its importance. He sat down quietly enough at the other side of the table, facing Stella; for the present quite content with the joy of looking at her dear, dear face, meeting her glad, sweet eyes which seemed to say all that he most longed to hear, and listening to the sound of her voice which was like the most melodious music to his ears.

How beautiful she was! He had not seen her for a whole month; and in that month she had gained a world of additional loveliness and had put on a thousand new charms. Her rich brown hair had even more red gold in its tint, more wave and ripple and straying rebellious little curls and feathery fringes in its lines; her large blue eyes, as deeply blue as sapphires and as soft as summer skies, were yet more beautiful in form, more eloquent in expression—and surely that fringe of curling lashes was even longer than before and made them yet softer and more starry! Her complexion, so pure and clear, with that creamy softness in the shadows and that faint flush on her cheeks which made it so like a sweet wild-rose, was almost purer and clearer—as if happiness had improved her health as well as gladdened her heart; and her supple figure looked yet more graceful in the light-brown dress which clothed her like wax without a suggestion of millinery artifice. Her voice, that index of the nature, was fuller and sweeter and more musical than he had ever heard

it—with always that faint echo of possible sadness in its music which showed that she had it in her to be a saint, a martyr, or a heroine, according to the run of circumstances and the ordering of life. Or, haply, she might be only a tender and loving woman whose pure history and blameless bearing would work like a charm in her own immediate world, giving a standard of excellency by which to live and a measure of beauty that would be like inspiration to the rest. And Cyril meant that this should be her life. By God's help he would keep her as she was—pure and meek—from now to the day of her death; and make her happier than any woman had ever been made in this sad world before!

She was peerless; she was supreme. No other girl in England was equal to her, personally or morally, thought Cyril—his eyes fixed on her with as much worship as love, as much reverence as passion. All the same, between whiles he eat his toast and drank his coffee and made an heroic breakfast after the manner of healthy, hungry, happy youth, glad to live and rejoicing in his bodily well-being and his love alike.

And what a perfect mother for such a daughter Mrs. Branscombe was! How sweet and gentle, how calm and self-restrained! She seemed never to think of herself, but to live only for others; to care only to do her duty; to make those around her happy; to be just and merciful for her child; self-sacrificing in her home; attractive in the highest sense and in every direction. Her life was the very poetry of womanly tenderness; but it was a pity that her health was so delicate. She had never been a robust woman and had always been one of that sensitive kind with whom the steel outwears the scabbard. Of late she had begun to look startlingly frail, though she did not complain, and Mr. Branscombe was too much absorbed in his own occupations, while Stella was too young to see all the length of the way that she had gone. Besides, daily familiarity with gradual change blinds the eyes which have not been opened by fear; but Cyril, pre-occupied though he was, was shocked by the increased pallor, the greater attenuation of that dear mother whose life was so infinitely beautiful and so infinitely precious!

Nevertheless she made no complaint; she never did; and when he anxiously asked how she was? and was she quite well?—she smiled and answered quietly:

"Yes, dear, quite well, thank you. A little good for nothing

at times. But the spring has been trying; and I always suffer in the east winds."

"I do not think you have suffered much this year, Matilda," said Mr. Branscombe with what in a less lovely man would have been a slight amount of peevish displeasure in his voice. "You have had nothing compared to my neuralgia."

"No, dear, indeed I have not," she answered with a sympathetic air. "You have been very bad at times, poor darling."

"At times? Always!" he said, almost as if she had flung a small affront into his fine face. "I give you my word, Cyril, I have not had one day this year free from the most atrocious pain. No man but myself would have borne what I have borne and not have lost both heart and patience."

"Poor papa!" said Stella, full of pity.

"My poor Frederick!" repeated Mrs. Branscombe, her voice and eyes also full of pity.

"I am very sorry to hear it, sir," said Cyril, as his contribution to the litany of condolence and compassion.

And yet how well and handsome and perfectly preserved and superbly got-up altogether this martyr to physical pain and mental depression was! Sixty last birthday—and no one would have given him more than thirty-five. How strange that his constant suffering had told so little on him!

"This is the kind of thing that tests the value of a man," said Mr. Branscombe, helping himself to a second plateful of omelette. "Pain, sleeplessness, nervous exhaustion, complete prostration, total loss of appetite—and yet the spirit rising superior to all these miserable infirmities of the flesh—the blood of the gentleman asserting itself in trials which would have made the cart-horse-like boor lie down and howl! I have never lost a day's work through it all, have I, Matilda?"

"No," said Mrs. Branscombe; "you have not, dear."

"I have gone on just as if I had been in rude health," he continued. "I have written and painted and composed without intermission. I have composed two-thirds of my operetta and I have written four thousand lines of my grand epic with not one single erasure—is there, Matilda?"

"No, dear, not one," said Mrs. Branscombe.

"No turning back and going over the ground again and again, like a stammering child learning to spell," he went on to say, tossing his handsome head and curling his thin

lips in disdain for the poor literary clods who laboured where he enjoyed, plodded where he skimmed, corrected and re-wrote, reconsidered and erased, where he swept the air with one beat of his strong wing and completed in a day what others would have taken ten to create and another ten to perfect. "All right off, my boy—currente calamo, at one dash! That is the way to work!—and that makes all the difference between mediocre talent and the higher reach of genius—between earth-born industry and the heavenly power of the divine afflatus. I will read it to you after breakfast, and play you some of the choicest morceaux in my operetta," he continued with a smile. He meant the offer for grace; and he expected it to be taken as he meant.

"That will be a great treat, I assure you," said Mrs. Branscombe, also smiling as she turned to Cyril; "but," to her husband, "suppose you keep it, dear, till after dinner? It will be so delightful then!—and Cyril may want to be out —or doing something else in the morning."

"Cyril has nothing surely of such importance on hand that he cannot hear my poem and operetta;" said Mr. Branscombe testily.

"No, sir. I assure you I shall be delighted to hear them. Thank you, dear Mrs. Branscombe, but of course I shall be charmed," said Cyril hastily.

Instinctively he desired to keep well with Stella's father; and Stella's father was decidedly touchy about his work; and very easily offended by the appearance of neglect. Though Cyril loved Mrs. Branscombe the better of the two, he would have had no hesitation in declining any offer that she might have made if not congenial to his humour; but Mr. Branscombe was different; and neither his son-in-law elect nor any one else dared to say "No" when he said "Yes." In his heart, however, the lad wished the grand epic and the best morceaux at the deuce, and his elegant father-in-law with them. He had not seen Stella for a whole month; this was his first visit after his engagement and that successful examination on which the material security of his love rested; he had travelled all night and had been mooning about the place for hours at the risk of making himself ridiculous to the men, simply to get three hours' extra happiness thrown in; and now it was coolly proposed that he should take the cream of the morning, and devote, heaven knows how much time, to listen to an epic written

without corrections—hundreds of lines at a sitting—and to the airs of an operetta dashed off without forethought and only by the grace of inspiration!

Fate, however, was kind and spared him. After breakfast the divine afflatus came on Mr. Branscombe with such power that he was forced to defer his recitations until the evening, as his wife had suggested. He must seize the inspired moment, he said, before the spiritual fire had burned down to the slag of everyday common-place. It would be a sin to the world—to the present and future alike—were he to let humanity lose what he had it in his power to bestow. Utterances such as his were not too frequent; and they were too valuable to be neglected. And to this Cyril naturally said "Yes, certainly," with fervour; and Stella and her mother said "Yes," too, with more simplicity of sincerity; and then the two lovers wandered away together, while Mrs. Branscombe went to her daily office of transcribing in a clear hand her husband's entangled hieroglyphics;—till forced to leave her work and take refuge in her own room, where only her maid knew the fatal secret of her life.

And now Cyril's turn had really come, and he was alone and undisturbed in the heaven of his love. He improved the occasion and took advantage of his freedom to tell Stella for the hundredth time how beautiful she was and how intensely he adored her; how divine a thing life was to him at this moment; and how he thought her condescension in loving him at all—he so far beneath her as he was in goodness and greatness of all kinds—the most wonderful part of the whole matter! He said a great deal more; but this was the theme round which all the rest was merely a succession of variously-phrased envelopes—ever the same thing under different verbal dresses. He loved her; she was something better than humanity; and his gratitude far equalled his glory in her love.

Ah! how sweet it was to say all this out on the lawn beneath the grand old spreading cedar! There they sat with instinctive modesty full in view of the house, but as much alone as if they had been indeed those primal two in Eden, taking with tremulous feet the first delicate and delicious steps along the enchanted pathway of love—that enchanted pathway which their posterity have trodden in the same way ever since. The birds were singing in the bushes, full-throated, rich, beseeching—here the chant of the conqueror,

there the song of the wooer; the flowers were blooming in the garden, and bees and butterflies and flies with gauzy wings, "laden with light and colour," rifled the cups and poised above the petals; from every leaf and blade of grass —from every tender twig flushed with sap, like blood that blushes—from every opening bud still sheathed like dreaming youth in its soft sweet case of innocence—from the moss about the tree-roots and from the resinous bark about the stems—poured out the subtle scents of spring, calling up the vague hopes, the unspoken desires, the tender, dumb, self-unrevealed wishes of youth and the unfulfilled. The blue sky, flecked with cloudlets which but gave added beauty to its serenity and presaged no disaster, shone through the black boughs of the great tree beneath which the lovers sat and the water-fall at the back of the house added its endless music to the great diapason of nature which filled the air with the large glad symphony of life. It was in the spring-time of the year and the springtime of their love. The day was yet the morning and they were in the morning of their lives. No sorrow had touched them, no clouds loomed dark and threatening in their sky. Sunshine and music, perfume and love, were about them like a golden haze, seen through which everything was transformed to supernatural beauty, where was not one sordid spot for pain to strike or sorrow to root. It was the heaven on earth of the poet and the dreamer—that heaven which we all enter when we love and are beloved—when we trust and are assured. It was the glad dawning of that future day when they should live in unending glory, fed on divine manna and free from the pains and penalties which beset ordinary humanity—it was the rosy-fingered dawn, heralding the great God of Life and Joy!

All this they felt as they sat beneath the horizontal branches of the great black spreading cedar-tree, while they spoke of their love and discussed their future; he, counting the days, and going into the arithmetic of the hours which lay between now and that blessed twenty-fifth of August when they were to be married; she, smiling when he laughed, glad when he exulted, hopeful because he was confident—always the woman's faithful following on the man's advancing feet—always her tender echo to his foregoing word.

How delightful it was to have him there! How happy she was!—and how delicious it was to be able to say to him that

she was so happy, and to answer: "Yes, I do," when he asked her at least twenty times that morning: "Did she love him? Was she sure?—did she love him quite as much as he loved her? But no! That was impossible! No one who ever lived on the face of this earth—no one—no one—ever did or could love as much as he, Cyril Ponsonby, loved her, Stella Branscombe! It was impossible. Human nature could not go beyond itself!"

And he believed what he said; and she believed it because he said it.

Just then they heard the sound of a hard, dry, rasping cough. It was Mrs. Branscombe, in her own room with Jane Durnsford, her maid.

"Poor mamma!" said Stella. "She has such a bad cough! It has clung to her all the winter and will not go."

"She is looking very pale and thin. I do not think she can be well," said Cyril.

"She says she is," Stella answered a little anxiously. "She never confesses to more than feeling rather languid."

"She is so unselfish!" said Cyril. "As unselfish as you, Stella—my own beautiful Stella, my Star, my Love!"

And with this they wandered off again on that enchanted pathway traversing Eden; and even Stella forgot that her mother had a cough and looked pale and white, while listening to the rhapsodies of her lover.

CHAPTER II.

THE LITTLE RIFT.

The first thing that would strike any one admitted into the Branscombe household was its air of exquisite refinement and poetic serenity; the next would be the consciousness of some want somewhere—a very vague and indefinite kind of consciousness, and a want not to be found like cobwebs for the looking, but there all the same;—something in the atmosphere that would jar on the more sensitive and yet the most observant could not say what it was nor where it lay.

Cyril, too young and strong and far too much in love to be either sensitive or observant outside that love, had never troubled himself about things which he could neither touch nor demonstrate; and vague consciousness was a state of

mind by no means natural to him. He saw all things with healthy positiveness, or he did not see them at all; and he had as little to do with shadowy suspicions as with ghosts. To his way of thinking Mr. Branscombe was all that an English gentleman of more mind than muscle, and of poetic feeling in excess of practicality, ought to be; and Mrs. Branscombe was the very ideal of a perfect wife, mother and gentlewoman. The two together were absolutely perfect; and what Stella was to him we know. That vague sense of want, that fine thread of something not quite real, that faint echo of hollowness beneath the golden sands discovered by others did not exist for him; and he accepted the appearance of things with boyish good faith, wishing neither to lift up transforming veils nor to scratch off polished surfaces.

And indeed by the look of things, what a perfect household it was!—and how invidious as well as needless it was to imagine flaws where none were visible, or that the circle was not true when no one could find the exact point where the line ran flat! Moreover, with whom did the fault lie?—if indeed fault there were at all; which Cyril would have passionately denied had he been questioned. Most certainly not with Mrs. Branscombe, all but perfect as she was. With Stella? Ask if the moon gives darkness instead of light, if the sun breeds fog and miasmatic vapours! No, certainly not with Stella; and if not with these two, then undoubtedly not with Mr. Branscombe.

The kind of man of whom the women of his family are at once so proud and so much afraid—to whom they give up their lives and think themselves happy as well as honoured in the sacrifice—whose will is as a Divine command and whose opinions on all matters carry with them the authority of righteousness and the weight of perfected knowledge—to serve whom is to carry incense to the altar, and to fail whom is to be guilty of irreligion;—Mr. Branscombe was the high priest of his household; a kind of domestic Apollo, representing the last word of refinement and the supreme result of culture. He was eminently a Superior Person who had to be petted and taken care of, flattered, caressed, given way to, and surrounded by the adulation of love at once submissive and protecting. He was never to be crossed in his moods, nor interrupted, nor told unpleasant news, nor consulted in cases of difficulty, nor made free of any form of truth which would be likely to jar on a nature so finely organized and

full of exquisite susceptibilities as his. He was to be obeyed at a hint; his desires were to be divined and fulfilled without the trouble of interpretation; and his comfort was to be attended to without hitch or worry. And then he was to be allowed to think that he drove the whole team and was eminently master in his own house. And when, as he often did, he complained of the distressing amount that he had to do and the weight of responsibility laid on his shoulders, his wife did not laugh nor his daughter remonstrate in favour of the mother who pulled the labouring oar while he flourished the flag—the one accepting for love and deliberate decision what the other received in faith.

Mr. Branscombe was still an exceedingly handsome man, as he had ever been. When he was in the Guards, and before he married, he was known as Handsome Fred Branscombe by his friends—Finery Fred by his enemies; and the conscious airs and little affectations of a beauty-man still clung to him. He spent a good deal of his time in devising becoming studio dresses for himself, chiefly of velvet, with appropriate collars, bands and "birette;" his still luxuriant locks were marvellously black and his elegant moustache and beard—cut Vandyke-fashion—had defied the silver fingers of time with as much extraordinary pertinacity as had his curling raven tresses. His hands were long, poetic, white and well preserved; and his rather rodent-like teeth, as well as his waist and feet, were marvels of care and get-up.

Besides his beauty which he still cherished; his toilette to which he sacrificed as much time and thought as if he had been a pretty woman on the wane; his reputation as a lady-killer, which he never forgot, he was, as he had always been, a kind of dandy in art—playing a little on the piano, painting not a little in oils, writing poetry of an ambitious kind as well as *vers de société* for ladies' albums, setting charades and one-act plays for drawing-room entertainments, and the like. Rather late in life, namely at forty years of age, he had married sweet-faced Matilda Jerningham—"that good Matilda," as he used to call her; with a certain lofty compassion for her intellectual inferiority which meant confession of his magnanimity in overlooking her deficiencies for the sake of her excellencies. And soon after his marriage he left the army and took up his abode at Rose Hill, near Highwood. Here he turned to Art, as he called his play, and founded his title to distinction on his dandyism of pursuit as

well as of person. He undertook as many things as if he had been the Admirable Crichton himself. Without more than the merest smattering of musical knowledge, ignorant of the first principles of thorough-bass and the law of harmony, he composed rondos and sonatas, motifs and nocturnes—and of late he had begun an opera, score and libretto both, which he called his Magnum Opus. He did not know an Alexandrian from an hexameter, nor an iambic from a trochee, but he dashed off odes and sonatas by the dozen and lately he had plunged into an epic with an airy grace which poets of long practice in the art of rhyme and rhythm might have envied. And though he could not draw a round thing to look solid, nor an upright thing in stable equilibrium, he painted pictures of all genres, and attacked a portrait as confidently as a landscape, a cattle-piece, the heroic imaginativeness of high art or the accurate delineations of still life. His pictures were magnificently framed and hung in the various dwelling-rooms according to what he called the harmony of associated ideas. They made professional artists turn hot and cold by turns when invited to discuss them on their merits; while even the technically ignorant, who had eyes and no knowledge, laughed in their sleeves at the anatomy of the living things and the drawing of the inanimate.

All the same his wife praised and encouraged him; and no one knew whether she believed in him sincerely or only flattered him because of the sweet policy of love. And naturally Stella followed her mother's lead. Born and educated in the worship of her father as a Superior Person, she went on worshipping him and believing in him now, just as she used when a child; holding him, as she had been taught to hold him, as the one transcendent man of all creation, the ne plus ultra of English gentlehood and cultured civilization. He was to her the impersonation of Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light;" and when she thought of the illustrious dead each seemed to her in some sort a phase of dear papa—that microscopic and œcumenical genius who contained all forms of beauty and goodness within himself and radiated on every side, where others shine only on one.

He, on his part, received all this loving adulation as a king might receive the tribute of his vassals. Their worship of the highest in him honoured these women who paid it even more than it honoured him to whom it was paid. It was the recognition of superiority, he said; and their power of recog-

nition proved their own worth. The clod does not worship the glow-worm, but man adores the sun. It was his due and their duty; and the two principles were as harmonious as a musical chord. He was fond of both wife and daughter, and rested on the one far more than the other knew. That good Matilda of his was everything to him—eyes and hands and feet and brains—mother, wife, lover, audience and applause, all in one. She followed his humours, bent herself to his shape, interpreted his wishes and guided while she obeyed. She guarded him from every unpleasant accident of domestic life, yet gave in to his fancy of holding himself as the pivot round which the whole thing revolved. She loved him; or rather she had loved him when she had married him full of enthusiasm for his genius, of admiration for his beauty, of gratitude for his love, of a girl's romantic belief in his infinite superiority. Whether she woke from her dream and found something in the weary life of reality which she had not suspected in the ideality of love, or whether she went on in her happy blindness, she never told. All that the world, Stella and her handsome husband himself saw, was a devotion that had no limits, an expressed admiration that was without stint, and a supple self-effacement that made some women angry, others jealous and a few contemptuous of her slavishness.

They had been married two years before the birth of their child came as an interruption—or addition—to their happiness. It was an even chance which it would be. Happily it was the latter. Mr. Branscombe was rejoiced to be a father. It completed the circle, he said; and he talked hazily about Plato's triangle and the divinity of childhood. It gave him occasion for a picture of his Household Star—the baby in its nightgown—for a canzonet and a birthday ode, a lullaby and a nocturne; and he glorified himself in that pink little bundle sucking its fist in the cradle upstairs as if he were Jove and this the infant Minerva, or as if he were the first man to whom had been born a child. He gave the name—Stella. She was the Star of the House and the word went well in poetry. He had hesitated long between May and Iris—the one for her month, the other a messenger from heaven; he had tried Violet and Rose, Daisy and Eglantine; he had thought of Mary for sweetness, of Margaret for dignity; and he had gone through all the heroines of fiction and history. But none composed so well as Stella; and the Star therefore she remained.

He could scarcely have found a name more appropriate. As time went on and her character developed, the girl proved more and more her right to be named as something bright and pure and high and heavenly. She had not a fault; or if any at all it was that she had none. She was almost too good, too self-sacrificing, too high-minded. She wanted the relieving shadows of a silly weakness here, a wilful naughtiness there. She was just a little angel, said all her nurses, all her teachers; and gave no trouble to any one. Yet she was not sickly. She had sound nerves, a full chest, a healthy appetite; she could ride without fear, play lawn-tennis to perfection, and row as if she had been born with an oar in each hand. She was without morbid fancies or unwholesome superstitions and was just a loving, devoted, conscientious and unselfish little girl, with the possibilities in her of martyrdom should the occasion occur. She would have loved her heathen lover better than her life, but she would have preferred, to his love with apostacy, death and bearing faithful witness to the truth. She was a girl whom the most impassioned man could have loved wholly, without understanding more than her sweetness, seeing more than her beauty; and she was one whom a sage would have honoured and a priest would have dedicated.

Such as she was, she was Cyril Ponsonby's Adored; and he was never weary of congratulating himself on his marvellous good fortune, nor quite able to understand why she should have honoured him—she who might have married a duke had she liked—and he, who was comparatively a mere nobody, with only one hundred and fifty pounds a year of private fortune and nothing more certain than brains, energy, youth and the future for the rest!

Though by no means a brilliant marriage in a worldly sense, this union of their only daughter with young Cyril Ponsonby had met with no opposition from the parents. It was suitable in point of age and birth and they could afford a dowry which would ensure the barring out of that cruel wolf whose black muzzle so often thrusts itself within the house when the door has but slender golden fastenings. The lad was well-built, healthy, generous, strong, and handsome in a fine, manly way—more suggestive of field-sports than lady-killing. The two young creatures loved each other; what more was wanted than what they had? He was not rich certainly, but his family was good and his name was without stain; and

with his prospects and her dowry there was no cause for fear. It would be a sorrow to part with Stella, of course; but girls are made to be married and taken out of the home; and they, the parents, always had each other.

"While you live, my good Matilda, I shall never want a companion," said Mr. Branscombe, when the thing was talked of between them.

"No; while I live you will always have some one to attend on you and take care of you," she answered tenderly.

But nothing was said of her, the mother, nor where she was to look for consolation. In her love and her duties, of course, Mr. Branscombe would have said, had he been asked. What was the final cause of that good Matilda's existence but to give without question of receiving? What is the glory of woman but to love, to bless and to bestow? Had he not said so in that sonnet which he had addressed to "My Wife?"—that sonnet wherein he had compared her to Ceres; to Juno; to Saint Barbara with all the little children gathered round her feet beneath her cloak; to the moth, which lays its eggs and dies; to the grass which feeds the lambs; to the oak which man immortalizes in a temple, a mansion, a ship; to the coal which is burned for the benefit of a hero or a poet. That good Matilda was born to set forth the beauty of self-effacement and the holiness of self-sacrifice; and he was not the one to interfere with natural arrangements and throw the machinery of Providence out of gear by ministering to that which had been predestined to minister to him.

And she, whatever she might feel, said nothing by way of regret—not even to Stella herself—but rather did her best to hasten on the marriage as much as it was seemly to do; she and faithful Jane Durnsford, her maid, alone knowing why.

So there the whole thing stood on velvet, as sporting men say. There was not a hitch, not a cross, not a cloud; and the lute of life and love gave forth its fullest and most melodious music.

It was now May, and in August the two were to be married. Three months which love ran into days as they passed and longing lengthened into years as they were looked at—three months of blissful anticipation, of joyous realities—and then the fulfilment of their dearest dreams.

Meanwhile, the young lovers sat on the lawn beneath the spreading cedar-tree, while Mrs. Branscombe and her maid

discussed the secret that was between them, and Mr. Branscombe, in his study below, dashed off at white-heat verses which would not scan, rhymes which were not harmonic, and thoughts which were so much intellectual chaff without a grain of wheat to give sustenance or support. But he was satisfied with his work, dear man!—and presently, getting impatient by her absence, he called that good Matilda to listen to what he had done, and be, as so often before, his audience and his applause.

When dinner was over and the family had assembled in the drawing-room, then the famous epic was produced and read to its author's running commentary of interpolation—his designation of the fine image here, the sonorous music there—the cadence of this line, the ingenious rhyme of that.

> "Then black-browed night arose,
> With her veil of stars and snows."

"That is fine, Matilda, is it not? You see the image, Cyril? The stars spangling the veil of night—that veil the snow-topped mountains. Perhaps it will not bear the coarse touch of prose," said Mr. Branscombe with a little hesitation; but in poetry, which is so much more vague and suggestive, it comes grandly."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Branscombe.

"I think it lovely, papa," said Stella, whose faculty did not lie in criticism.

"It is a very fine image, sir," said Cyril, who had not heard very clearly.

And when Mr. Branscombe had thus gathered in his little harvest, he smiled, raised the delicate white hand which had been drooping gracefully from the wrist over the arm of his chair, ran his fingers through his curled and scented hair, smoothed with the tips of his fingers his irreproachable shirt-front, and then went on with his reading as before.

Suddenly Mrs. Branscombe gave a deep sigh and turned deadly pale. A shudder ran over her; her hands dropped nervelessly in her lap; her eyes closed; her breath came in short gasps; and she fell backward in her chair in a strange and sudden faint.

All was tumult and confusion, tears, distress and terror; but when Jane Durnsford came on the summons, she seemed strangely collected and as if she had gone through the whole thing before. She knew exactly what to do: and she did it;

and when Mr. Branscombe, whose helpless distress was almost as pitiable as his wife's condition, said half peevishly: "Have you ever seen your mistress like this before, Durnsford?" she answered with a sudden flash in her eyes which no one could exactly read: "Yes, sir, many times. It has only been a wonder to me that nobody but myself knew."

"Send for the doctor at once!—send for Dr. Quigley, instantly!" cried Mr. Branscombe in extreme agitation. "Do you mean to say, Durnsford, that your mistress is chronically out of health, and I do not know it? Where are those men? Send for Quigley! Cyril, my boy, do you go for him! Heavens! that I should have been deceived to this frightful extent!"

"It is of no use sending for Dr. Quigley, sir," said Jane Durnsford. "I know what to do as well as he can tell me. Indeed, he did tell me."

"Oh, Durnsford, has mamma consulted Dr. Quigley, and we never knew!" said Stella, who was kneeling by her mother's side chafing her hands.

"Yes, miss," answered the maid.

"But what is it? What is it?" repeated Mr. Branscombe.

"Heart, sir. She has what the doctor calls aneurism of the heart, and may die at any moment. But she has not gone this time, poor dear!" added Jane, as a slight sigh stirred the lips of the fainting woman and a tinge of colour stole back into her waxen face.

CHAPTER III.

ANTICIPATIONS.

No; she had not gone this time; and on her recovery, that good Matilda—who was so much better than her husband knew—made light of her attack; said it was nothing, and that they were not to be alarmed. She half rebuked Jane Durnsford for her imprudent admission; but she was forced to confess that the doctor had certainly told her something was a little wrong with her heart, and that she might die suddenly if she over-excited herself, lifted a heavy weight, ran up stairs, got into a violent rage, or did any other childish folly not very likely to be done by a sedate woman of her age, she added, with one of her sweet smiles which were more

pathetic than tears. They were not to fret or worry about her, she said. Creaking wheels last a long while, and she should live to look after them all and see that they got into no mischief for many years to come! They were to forget this little alarm, and not allow it to sadden them.

And with this she drew Stella to her bosom and gave her hand to Cyril.

"If I only might see you both happy!" she said tenderly. "I wish that August was nearer!" she added with a smile checked by a sigh.

"My poor wife!" said Mr. Brauscombe. "I must read you no more of my poetry. It evidently stirs you too much. If I had known of your state I would have spared you the excitement—delightful as it is to me as an artist to see how you are moved."

"I can always hear your work, dear," answered Mrs. Branscombe quietly. "I should be sorry to lose the pleasure of knowing what you do."

"Yes; it would be a privation for you, my poor dear; but if it is bad for you?—I must take care of you and not do you harm!"

In this Mr. Branscombe was, for the moment, both considerate and sincere. He did really think it was a dangerous experiment for this poor, weak heart to have to listen to his halting rhymes and foggy metaphors; and it was therefore a sacrifice of self to conscience, of vanity to tenderness, when he said that he would give up his recitations because the mental emotions which they excited were hurtful to the health of his good Matilda. But Mrs. Branscombe, for all that she accepted her husband's words as they were meant for the moment, knew only too well the truth of things; and, meeting bravely what she knew would overtake her, she shook her head in pleasant deprecation as she answered:—

"Always well enough to hear you, dear."

"Ah!" he said smiling; "you are only a child after all, Matilda! Sweets—sweets—though they hurt you. Well, I must ménager for you, and not let you be excited beyond what you can bear."

And with this the matter dropped and the death, which had been so fatally near, faded into the background as a grim sentinel ever standing between the chamber and the sun, but not obtrusive nor making his presence distinctly felt.

The secret, hitherto kept with such care between the mis-

tress and the maid, gradually leaked out; and soon the rumour crept through the neighbourhood that Mrs. Branscombe, of Rose Hill, was seriously ill and that her days were numbered. Exaggerations were added, as of course; and she was credited with all the diseases possible between epilepsy and consumption. But the main fact was unfortunately true, and the world gradually came to the knowledge of that which had looked it in the face unrecognised so long.

"Poor, dear, sweet Mrs. Branscombe! How sorry I am! But if I were Stella I would throw aside everything else and marry out of hand at once," said Mrs. Latrobe, the handsome, fair-haired widow who had been obliged to return with her child to her old home, the Laurels, where she lived under the heavy-handed tutelage of her mother, Mrs. Morshead—"that terrible old woman" as she was generally called; and with reason.

"I have not the smallest doubt but that you would, Augusta," said her mother sourly, in reply. "Between self-willed indulgence and duty there is very little question which you would choose."

This was a hit at that unfortunate past when Augusta had carried her point of marrying Professor Latrobe—a man much older than herself, who could make no settlements and whom she did not specially love, but whom, in default of a better chance, she accepted and went away with, simply to escape from her mother's intolerable tyranny. Now that he had died and left her penniless, she thought herself bound by duty to return to the old bondage; and for the sake of her little son and his inheritance, she went back to the misery of her past, rendered harder to bear because of her temporary escape into peace, freedom and affection.

It was a horrible life. Mrs. Morshead treated her daughter as something between a servant and a child, and made her daily bread very bitter to her. No one but Augusta could have borne it; but then Augusta Latrobe had that rare quality in woman, absolute self-control and reasonableness. What she thought it wise to do, that she did in spite of everything, disinclination and pain included; and when it was necessary to submit to unpleasantnesses—well!—she submitted cheerfully and made the best of them.

"But, mother, she has a duty to Cyril Ponsonby too," Augusta said briskly; for with all her tact and sweetness of

temper she held her own against her mother on occasions. She was not rolled quite flat, though she was made very smooth. "If that poor dear Mrs. Branscombe dies and Mr. Branscombe does not want Stella to marry and leave him—he is quite capable of it—what is Cyril to do? Give up his wife and happiness for that selfish old fellow?"

"What else should he do? What else can Stella do but stay with her father?" retorted Mrs. Morshead. "What has become of all the filial duty and obedience of your modern daughters, I wonder? What ought a good girl to do but stay with her widowed father or mother? After all the trouble and anxiety that you have caused us from the hour of your birth up to the very last day of our lives, it is not much to ask that you should attend to us when we get old."

"In that case the world would come off but oddly," said Augusta. "Would you let only those girls marry where there are many in the family, and always keep one as a kind of nest-egg at home? Would you never let only daughters marry?"

"I would at least have them marry men who could maintain them like ladies while they lived; and leave them a few pounds to keep them out of beggary when they died," said Mrs. Morshead fiercely. "I would not have them first disobey a mother and nearly break her heart by their undutifulness, and then come back on her with a family, as the only refuge against the workhouse. And none but such a foolish, weak, old creature as I am would put up with it, so I tell you!"

"Now, mamma, don't be cross! You know you are much happier with me and Tony than you would be without us, and you only like to grumble. But I will not let you scold. It is bad for you, and you do not mean it."

As she said this Augusta rose from her place, giving her mother a nice little tap on her heavy old shoulders as she passed her, and went out of the room just a shade hastily. She was good-tempered and she was reasonable, but she had nerves and red blood like any other person; and she did not care that her patience should be over heavily taxed.

Others beside Augusta Latrobe said they wished that Stella Branscombe would get married now, at once; for every one seemed to feel that danger threatened her happiness should her mother die before that happiness had been secured. But though Mrs. Branscombe seriously proposed the shortening

of the interval, and urged the hastening of the marriage by at least six weeks—and though, naturally enough, Cyril was ready and Stella was not reluctant—yet Mr. Branscombe would not hear of it. He had not written his Epithalamium; his grand Wedding March, to be played in the church during the service, which was to be choral, was not composed; and he was too much occupied with his epic to attend to either just yet. And with these important objections he overruled every suggestion offered, and opposed an immovable opposition to his wife's prayer. And when a man talks of his work as superior to human happiness, not much good is to be done, if he has the reins in his own hands and can drive the chariot of life at his pleasure.

It was in vain that Mrs. Branscombe tried all her old arts, hitherto so successful; in vain that she sought to guide him in the right way by tender flatteries, subtle suggestions. He yielded to none of them; and even showed signs of seeing through the veil which until now had been so impenetrable. To paint him to himself as grand, magnanimous, semi-divine, should he do this thing or that which it was his manifest duty to do, though generally efficacious enough as a rule, failed now. His pride was bound up with the production of this Epithalamium which was to be printed in silver letters on white vellum, tied up with silver cord, and distributed to all the guests. His heart was set on hearing his grand Wedding March played by a good organist—whom he would have down from London; and if the assembled hearers should not have the good taste to tell him that he had equalled Mendelssohn, and perhaps surpassed him, his own knowledge would supply their deficiency, and he would pity their ignorance, not suspect his own shortcomings. It was too much to expect that he would give up all this intellectual splendour, all this artistic triumph, merely to satisfy the whim of his good Matilda and allow the two troublesome young creatures to be married sooner than was arranged. The twenty-fifth of August had been fixed as the auspicious day; and the twenty-fifth of August it should be; and his dear wife only lost her time in trying to bend his will. He was resolute, determined, positive. He owed it to himself, his genius, his fame and his child's glory to be firm in this matter; and what he owed to himself he generally paid in full. No more need be said—no, not though she besought with insistence and strange agitation—tears in her eyes and her voice broken as one

earnestly pleading for a grace that carried with it more than appeared in the words.

It was bad for her to excite herself, her husband reminded her with exasperating placidity—that placidity which means the very beatitude of obstinacy. She must be wiser than this; she must indeed! This was more like an hysterical school-girl than his good Matilda who was generally so reasonable and easy to manage! And to break herself against the rock of his will, for a whim, was perfectly impracticable and impossible. How absurd! The idea was inadmissible; and she need not give herself any trouble about the matter. His mind was made up, and he could not possibly change it to entertain her proposition.

"My Epithalamium—my Wedding March—surely Matilda, you, who respect my genius, cannot advise me to abandon these two great works—these immortal monuments to our daughter's name!"

"I should be very, very sorry, as you know, dear," was her answer; "but they could come after, all the same, could they not?"

"And lose their point, their life, their meaning, their raison d'être? My good Matilda! how easy it is to see that you know nothing of the sacred fire, the divine afflatus! Ask a poet to forego the theme of his inspiration—ask a musician to allow those harmonious chords vibrating in his brain, to be for ever mute in the strings—and you ask him for what is dearer to him than life. Between the unnecessary hastening of this marriage by six weeks, and the perfection of any two ideas, there can be no kind of hesitation; and I must say I am a little pained as well as surprised by your proposing what is practically artistic suicide!"

"But cannot you do them now, dear?" she asked. "You would have nearly six weeks from now if you would consent to the marriage at the beginning of July."

"How can I leave my epic to break new ground? My good Matilda, what an irrational scheme! The inspiration that is in me now might never return if once checked. Genius is not like a loaf of bread, my poor wife. You cannot cut your slice then lay it aside for to-day to find it serviceable in the cupboard when you want it to-morrow. You must catch the divine fire as it flows, or rather I should say as it burns. If I were to give up my epic it would remain for ever a fragment—a colossal fragment truly, but one that would fill the

world with a sense of loss—that would be a sin against humanity at large, in that it had never been finished and perfected."

"Is it really impossible?" she asked again. "With your facility could you not force yourself to return to the old strain?"

"No," he answered shortly. "What you are pleased to call my facility is in point of fact only the rush and swirl and outpour of genius. I could not force myself to that which comes unbidden like the winds of the morning, the zephyr of the evening. And," he added peevishly, dropping his grand manner for colloquial terseness: "I shall not try;—so now you know."

With this the conversation ended. There was no good in wounding her husband's vanity without result; and Mrs. Branscombe had always known when the next would be just the step too far, and how to hark back gracefully over a shaky bit of ground already traversed. Had not her whole life been passed in the exercise of this delicate discrimination?—this tact that was almost like second-sight?—in removing sticks and straws out of his way, so that he should have smooth walking no matter whose feet were torn?—in making him happy and contented through his vanity, rather than suffering that vanity to lead him into follies abroad because wounded and neglected at home? It was only one among thousands of the examples with which her days were filled; yet this was the hardest of all. She would have given all that she possessed in life to have hastened this marriage and to have known that Stella's happiness was secure. But she was powerless when it came to a real collision of wills between herself and her husband. When he ruled a negative her desire was nowhere; and what she could not win by management she could not obtain by force of decision.

"Your father will not consent, my darling," she said to her daughter when she came back from her sleeveless errand. "He has set his heart on his poem and the Wedding March; and it would pain him so much if he did not have them ready for the day! He says he cannot possibly do them before the twenty-fifth of August; and you know how much he holds by his work. We cannot say anything when he puts forth this plea."

Mrs. Branscombe said all this quite quietly and naturally; but she did not look at her daughter while she spoke. She

found it difficult to uphold the claims of a bit of wordy jingle and ungrammatical music before those of human life and happiness.

"Dear papa! how good and kind he is to take so much trouble," said Stella simply. "I am so grateful to him, and I am sure they will be grand; but I wish that he could have got them done earlier. Not that I care about marrying sooner for myself, darling, but you seem to wish it so much, and so does poor Cyril; but, after all, perhaps papa knows best."

"He generally does," said Mrs. Branscombe.

She had brought up her daughter in this faith and she upheld it even at this moment.

"And then, if you are not so well as you ought to be, I do not care to leave you a minute sooner than I must," continued Stella lovingly, putting her arms round her mother's neck. "It will be bad enough when it comes, though I do love Cyril so dearly—oh! you know that! But if I could have married and settled here in Highwood, quite close to you so that I could have seen you every day and all day long, how nice that would have been! How I wish I could, mother!"

"So do I, my darling," answered her mother. "But it is the law of life. We mothers have to give up our children—our sons to the world and our daughters to husbands. It cannot be helped! It is the price that we pay for the glory and delight of maternity."

"It is a dreadful pity, all the same," said Stella.

"Will you say that to Cyril, my pretty?" asked her mother playfully. "Or is it only to please the old mother?"

The girl laughed her denial, and kissed her mother's beating throat. How it beat! How hard and heavy and full and quick were those hammer-like throbs! Was this part of the terrible presage? She did not say what she thought, but she clung to her mother very tenderly as she answered:

"I love Cyril better than my life, mother; but he knows how much I love you and papa too; and he is such a dear, good boy!—he is not jealous."

"Who is not jealous?" asked Cyril, coming through the open window from the lawn.

"You," said Stella, smiling all over her face as if a sunbeam had crossed it.

"I have no cause," he answered. "If I had, I do not say what I would be. I do not think I should be generous

enough to divide your affections, even if you wished it. But I cannot imagine that. What made you say that I was not jealous?"

There was just a dash of uneasiness in his voice; something that was not quite like Cyril's usual richness and roundness of confidence in himself and fortune.

"Jealous of papa and mamma," said Stella, again kissing her mother.

He drew a deeper breath.

"Oh! that's it, is it? Well, no, I am not likely to be jealous of them. That would be absurd and bad form too!"

"You have no reason to be," said Mrs. Branscombe quietly. "The child loves you as much as the most exacting lover in the world need desire. Never forget that, Cyril! She loves you with her whole heart and soul."

The mother spoke tremulously; and as she spoke the tears came for the second time to-day into her mild, patient eyes.

"Dearest mother! My own dear, darling mother!" said Stella fondly.

"She does not love me less for loving you so much," said Cyril also fondly; but why this sudden sadness? this under-current of pain? this strange sense of shadow in the cloudless sky? Ah! he forgot that she, this dear mother, was ill. It was her failing health that had touched her nerves and made her so much more sensitive than she used to be. "And whatever happens," he continued, meaning Stella's marriage and consequent departure from home; "she will always love you just as much as she does now. One love does not drive out another, and her heart is large enough to hold the two."

"You answer for me very confidently," said Stella forcing a laugh; and the mother also forced a laugh in concert, so that the sudden shadow passed and the under-current of pain was lost in the ripple of the smiling surface. And then Cyril and Stella went out into the garden, where they spent nine-tenths of their time, and once more found Paradise and security beneath the spreading branches of the old cedar on the lawn.

"If only Fred would have consented!" replied Mrs. Branscombe, looking after them sadly. "If I could but see her safe, and feel sure that she would not have to live as I have lived! Oh, that God would give me strength to carry me over these coming weeks, so that I may live till I have seen her safe!"

Would she? When Colonel Moneypenny asked Dr. Quigley

as they came out of church the Sunday after the rumour of her malady crept about: "How he really thought Mrs. Branscombe was?" and "Was it true that she was in a very bad way, and might reckon up the weeks she had to live on her fingers?" the doctor—who liked her and knew of her more than any one did in Highwood—looked more than professionally grave as he answered: "It is impossible to limit the recuperative power of nature; but if she does not get better soon we may prepare for her being much worse." And this from a man as cautious and cheery as Dr. Quigley was almost as bad as a sentence of death.

It was indeed doubtful if she would last over these three intervening months. That aneurism was certainly not decreasing, it was scarcely stationary; and she had a cough, which was about the worst thing she could have in her present circumstances. It shook her to pieces, as Jane Durnsford said, and made her often feel as if this were indeed death. She was also evidently anxious about something, though no one could imagine what it was. There was nothing new in her life, save this marriage which she had sanctioned and desired with all her heart. So why should she be anxious? they asked one of another; and no one knew what to answer. No one knew the secret of her thoughts; not even Jane Durnsford, who had known that other secret so long. But every one felt that something was underneath the smooth appearance of things, and that sweet, patient, gentle Mrs. Branscombe—that good Matilda—had some kind of unspoken trouble which did not tend to make her present precarious state of health more reassuring.

The first fear passed, things gradually slipped back into their old groove. All was just as it had ever been; save that Stella hung about her mother more tenderly than before—anticipated her wishes with more of the prescience of love—and, for all that she was in one sense absorbed by Cyril, seemed to live more and more in her mother's life; that Cyril was even more contented, more gentle, more loving, and more considerate than he had ever been—and he had always been "such a dear boy to me," as she used to say; and that Mr. Branscombe prefaced his perpetual requirements with: "If you feel well enough, my good Matilda;"—"If it will not tire you too much, my poor wife"—will you come into my elegant studio and give me your time, your mental energies, your attention, your very life's blood, by listening to the poorest

trash that ever dribbled from a human brain, with the understanding that you are to applaud and find it all excellent and without fault?

The weight was laid on her as heavily as before; and what a terrible weight it was! Who that has not known can estimate the pain of this awakening from the loveliest dream of romance that ever gilded maiden fancy into the most meagre prose of reality by which wifely knowledge was disenchanted?—finding the man whom she had believed to be a genius nothing but a wind-bag; finding the nature which she had believed to be chivalrous and exalted, selfish, vain and mean; finding the man to be simply a mask; yet forced to live as if she still believed in the depth of shallowness so sorrowfully gauged; forced to pretend that she found his verses poetry, his music melody, his paintings art; forced to give her life in transcribing, and her strength in praising, things which were not worth the paper on which they were written! And she, naturally the soul of truth, to live with the oppressive knowledge of her own life-long deception and his substantial worthlessness, yet to be unable to tell the terrible secret to living being—to be almost afraid and ashamed to confess it to herself!

No wonder that her nerves and heart had given way under the strain; that nature had avenged herself on the strength by which she had been coerced!

This, then, was why Mrs. Branscombe yearned so ardently to live till she had seen Stella safely married. She knew what her own existence had been as the moral sacrifice, the intellectual victim, of her husband; and she feared that he would take her child as he had taken her, and make a second sacrifice when the first was exhausted. Should she, the mother, die before her daughter was safe under the protection of Cyril, she feared that the marriage would be broken off in order that Stella might be kept at home to be the companion of her father. Unable to rise to the dignity of unselfishness, or to bear the ennui of his loss and loneliness, he would take the girl's happiness as the cushion for his own, and break her heart and Cyril's that he might have some one to whom to read his epic and play over his latest nocturne. And then Stella would find out the true nature of this idolized father of hers, whom now she believed flawless and touched with a spiritual grace beyond that of the common race of men.

All this was just what no one in the whole world suspected. The Branscombe marriage had always passed for one of the happiest which the mind of man could conceive or the heart of woman desire. Tastes, souls, characters, were all twins one with the other, according to the general belief of society; and had any one at Highwood been told that Mrs. Branscombe was literally dying of her husband's artistic elegance—dying of his odes and his canzonets, his operettas and his pictures—it would have been as if he had witnessed an ugly miracle whereby beauty had suddenly become foulness and truth had crumbled down into falsehood.

But it would not have been believed. Mrs. Branscombe had kept the secret too well to give the smallest loophole of suspicion, save to Dr. Quigley—not even to poor Durnsford. She had married with the fullest faith in love and sentiment, and with the principle superadded of the strictest wifely duty. The wifely duty included in her mind absolute self-surrender and devotion. The wife of a criminal should stand by him in the dock; the wife of a sham should hide her knowledge of the mask and maintain the integrity of the thing represented only, not existing. Life-long deception for the maintenance of a husband's undeserved repute was a sorrow truly, but no sin—a strain, but no crime. A woman's conscience knew no higher virtue than conjugal devotion; and a mother's duty was involved in bandaging her children's eyes and bringing them up in blind worship of their paternal wind-bag. On this principle she had acted, in this practice lived; but the terrible tension told on her at last, and Dr. Quigley said to himself: "The wonder is, not that there is aneurism of the heart, but that it did not develop earlier and that it has lasted so long!"

CHAPTER IV.

FULFILMENT.

Stella had two especial friends at Highwood, Augusta Latrobe and Hortensia Lyon. They were friends fulfilling very different functions and of a very unequal calibre one from the other. Mrs. Latrobe, though still young, had leaped the gulf which separates maidenhood from womanhood, and was therefore the denizen of an unknown country and so

far somewhat of a stranger to her former playfellows; while Hortensia was a girl like Stella herself and stood on the same plane and platform.

For all that, Augusta was perhaps really the favourite; and Stella usually gave good heed to what the bright-tempered, fair-haired, reasonable widow said to her. She felt that Augusta spoke from a broader view of things, a wider horizon and a clearer knowledge of life. Had she not been married for six years, living out of Highwood and in the heart of London society? Of course, then, she knew life better than a country girl who had never left home possibly could; and, as was said, for the most part Stella gave heed to her and respected her understanding.

But not this time! How indeed could she? When Augusta came up to Rose Hill and gravely proposed to the girl that she should marry Cyril Ponsonby—secretly, if need be, but at once—it nearly brought about a quarrel between the two, so great was the girl's horror and surprise at a proposition which seemed to her the very acme of indelicacy.

"Why should I marry, secretly and at once, when I am so soon to be Cyril's wife in the face of the world and without deceit?" she asked indignantly.

"There are many things which women can advise girls to do yet not be able to give all the reasons," was Augusta's tranquil answer. "If you were wise you would take my advice and act on it."

"But, Augusta, what would my father and mother say to such an extraordinary thing?" said Stella, opening her beautiful eyes to the widest. "What would Cyril himself think of it! He would be as shocked as I myself."

"Time would show," answered Augusta sententiously. "My advice is good, and I know what I am saying."

"You are generally not so mysterious," said Stella, trying to laugh the whole thing into vapour.

"You need not treat it lightly," returned her friend gravely. "I am mysterious if you like to say so; but I am awfully in earnest."

"Then give me some reason—tell me why," was Stella's rejoinder.

"Shall I? Are you sensible enough to hear the truth?"

"I think so," she said. "I care more for the truth, however unpleasant, than for pretty pretences."

"Well, then, listen. Suppose your mother dies. You

know she is in bad health, and may; so why do you shrink and say 'Oh, Augusta!' as if I had said something monstrous and impossible? Well, suppose she dies, then your marriage will be delayed, heaven knows how long; and you never know what may happen when once these things are put off."

"It would be such a sorrow," said Stella, her eyes full of tears, "that I could easily give up my own happiness for a little while. I do not think I should care much for myself at all if I lost her."

"And Cyril?"

"Cyril would feel with me, I am sure of that."

"And go to India without you?"

"If necessary, yes; but it would not be necessary. I could be married quietly, without parade or fuss, even if such a dreadful thing had happened. But I cannot bear to discuss the probability, Augusta. It is too dreadful."

"And if your father objected to the marriage?" continued Augusta, not heeding Stella's disclaimer.

"He would not."

"In that case the argument goes for nothing; but if he did, would you give up Cyril?"

"Augusta, how cruel you are to-day! How do I know what I would do?" said Stella, a certain look of terror breaking through the mournfulness on her face.

"Oh, I see! you would give up Cyril," said Mrs. Latrobe tranquilly.

"If papa wanted me to stay with him for a little while to comfort him, it would be my duty, even if I had to put off my marriage for a few months."

"And if he wanted you to break off altogether? Are you prepared to make that sacrifice too, Stella?"

"He would not ask me," she answered.

Mrs. Latrobe gave an odd kind of smile.

"You are just like all the rest," she said; "afraid of being pinned to a point. Well! remember that I counsel you to marry now, at once, without fuss and even secretly, if need be."

"And make my happiness out of my mother's chance of dying? Augusta! how dare you advise such a thing? It seems to me almost like murder—like killing her for my own advantage."

Augusta Latrobe slightly shrugged her shoulders. They were broad, finely-modelled, and as white and smooth as ivory beneath her dress.

"My dear," she said, "I have as much sentiment as any one need have, but I have flung overboard all superfluity. I find life a tight pattern at the best; and I think the wisest thing we can do is to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Analyze what I have said, and what harm is there in it? Only a very necessary precaution against possible disappointment, like settlements against your husband's possible ill-conduct in money when you marry. You believe in Cyril; but you will have settlements all the same as if you had not a particle of trust in him. You put your happiness into his hands, but you protect yourself by all the power of the law against his dishonour. So you believe in your father's unselfishness and your mother's immortality, but I for one think you would be wise to secure yourself against a possible disappointment in the one and sorrow from the other."

"You and I see things differently," said Stella. "I could not act in this way. It would be too cold-blooded!"

"Yes, that is just it. It would be rational; and reason always is cold-blooded," said Augusta.

"We need not be all reason—we must have a little sentiment—a little feeling," Stella returned.

"Ah, my dear! a very little is enough, I assure you. Reason carries the heaviest metal and goes the farthest, believe me. If you had the brains I always thought you had you would let me persuade you; and you would be Cyril Ponsonby's wife before the week was out."

"Now, do not let us talk of it any more," said Stella hastily. "I ought to be very angry with you, but I know that you mean well and have spoken for my good, and I cannot be vexed. But, indeed, dear Augusta, I am pained. I did not think you would have said all this."

"You are a good little goose," said Augusta kindly. "I have said my say; discharged my conscience; so now we will let the matter drop. You value sentiment you see, and I go in for common sense. We will see which wins in the end. Now, take me into your conservatory like a love. I hear you have the most magnificent lapageria in all Highwood, and my mother said I was to be sure and see it and ask your gardener how he has managed to cultivate such a beauty."

"You may ask, but he will not tell," said Stella, as lightly as she could speak. "Mason has his secrets of cultivation which he tells no one, not even us."

"What is his price?" said Augusta with unmoved placidity. "Every one has his or her price."

"Augusta, what an awful principle!" cried Stella.

"Truth always is awful, dear, to those who have not learned her lessons by heart. Then it becomes common-place and ceases to terrify," said Augusta; and with this the two went out into the garden on their way to the greenhouse, and Stella wondered if she should ever again love her friend as much as she once did, or forget the painful impression made on her by to-day's talk.

And as they went into the greenhouse they fell upon Cyril in the full freedom of prospective sonship, smoking his cigar among the flowers—tobacco being good against the green fly and the red spider.

While looking at the flowers, Augusta managed to get a few paces apart with Cyril. Really she scarcely knew why she took all this trouble about these young people and their concerns! What could it matter to her whether they married now or not? Only she was good-natured, and did not like to think that they would be made miserable. Still, half despising herself and half deprecating her own solicitude, she did what she could; so, bending over a fine petunia which she affected to praise and did not see, she said in a low voice to Stella's lover:

"Mr. Ponsonby, why don't you give up all the finery of your wedding, and get it over at once while Mrs. Branscombe is alive and well enough to go to it? Take my advice and marry the first day you can."

And before Cyril could answer, or had recovered from his astonishment, she had joined Stella over the lapageria, and was lost in amazement at the size of the flowers and the brilliancy of their colouring.

But Cyril mentally said to himself: "What a thorough woman that is! What a good-hearted darling!" and felt a strange impulse of friendship to her as the one woman who had interested herself in his love and Stella's.

Once again the family was assembled in the drawing-room after dinner as before, to listen to more lines added to that interminable epic which grew and grew like a mushroom in the night, or like that fish in the Arabian tales which threatened to fill the world with its appalling immensity. The sacred fire burnt with terrible fervour at this moment and the divine afflatus was breathed out in a surprisingly

shrill and prolonged note. And yet, the other side of contempt being pity, it was almost pathetic to see the intense satisfaction felt by the author of this hopeless stuff, and how sincerely assured he was both of his own genius and the world's illimitable gain in his works.

They were now sitting in the half-circle of established custom. Mr. Branscombe was at the outer edge in the stately, carved armchair which combined ease with dignity and had the air of a drawing-room throne. His right hand fell over the lion's head that formed the finish of the arm; his left held the precious manuscript. His scented locks, black and glossy with crafty pomades warranted not to dye, only to preserve, were artfully disposed in well-arranged layers to hide the tell-tale thinning tracts; his pointed beard and well-arranged moustache were treated with the same care as his hair; his evening dress was of faultless elegance, save perhaps for more jewellery than was permissible by the strictest canons of taste, but the gold of his heavy florid chain combined well with that narrow line of purple-blue beneath his waistcoat which suggested a riband of merit modestly hidden; his handsome face, with its thin, high, razor-edged nose, loosely curved mobile lips, fine eyes and clear transparent skin, was as sensitive as it was conscious; he looked the ideal of a former Beauty-man turned poet and artist in his latter maturity—Adonis aging into a gentleman-like Jupiter—Alcibiades developing into Plato.

His wife sat next him, in a smaller, less stately, less throne-like chair. His sense of fitness was so keen that he would have thought it a want of delicacy on her part, a something that savoured of strong-mindedness and conjugal rebellion, had she taken for her seat a chair resembling his. She might be queen where he was king, but she was queen in a minor degree, standing always on the step below his throne.

Cyril and Stella sat on the sofa, half facing these two, leaving room for a Florentine marble table by Mr. Branscombe's side, where he could place his sheets as he finished them, or refresh himself with *eau sucrée à fleur d'orange*—a beverage which greatly pleased him, and which he recommended to all his friends as a discovery made by himself alone.

So the time passed. At every four or five lines Mr. Branscombe interrupted his reading, which was of the sonorous and artificial kind, that he might appeal to his good Matilda for praise and confirmation.

"That is a fine example of alliteration, is it not, Matilda?" he said, as he broke off in the middle of a sentence to call attention to the epithet, "leafy-fingered Flora, flooding fields with summer sowing." "I flatter myself this has the true Shakespearian ring," he said again by way of commentary, when he had half sung, half chanted, these lines:

> "Can honour dwell in thick-skinned caitiff breasts?
> Or pure refinement where gross usage reigns?"

"Has Keats ever produced an image more purely Greek and sensuous than this?" was his next interruption when he came to a Hymn of Maidens, sung in strophe and anti-strophe to celebrate the victory of their fellow-countrymen—which victory he described as the dashing of young eagles against the storm-clouds in a murky sky, while the maids themselves were white doves fluttering in the sunshine. How the dashing of young eagles against the storm-clouds could do any good by way of dispersion he omitted to state. Such poetry as his does not concern itself with the facts of natural history; and versified meteorology is notoriously free from fetters.

It was these interruptions and perpetual appeals to attention—these incessant bids for admiration—which made the torture of these readings to Mrs. Branscombe. Had her husband been content to read on and on, as some men do, needing no more than the mere appearance of attention, with sometimes a word of praise judiciously interjected when a pause naturally came and it was only common politeness to fill it, she could have borne it bravely. She could have thought out her own thoughts, and been no more disturbed by the monotony of her husband's voice than by the sough of the wind among the trees or the falling of the cascade behind the house. But this perpetual demand, this ceaseless strain, made the whole thing a fatiguing exercise, and one which exhausted her even more than bodily exertion. And it was one which habit and custom, instead of softening, rendered only the more difficult.

Cyril and Stella were not thus appealed to, and therefore had nothing to bear. They made the dumb audience of whose sympathies the poet was sure; but that good Matilda was the chorus whose voice must be heard and whose minor action must run along the line taken by the actors. Those two silly young people might listen or not, as they choose, for all the

attention paid to them by Mr. Branscombe. So long as they behaved themselves with outward decorum, did not giggle nor whisper nor shuffle with their feet nor make any kind of stir or noise, they might talk together by eyes and little gestures, by happy smiles and mutual understanding, all in the foolish way of lovers, and earn no rebuke for unbecoming conduct. And as they did thus occupy themselves each would have been hard put to it to say distinctly what all this monotonous recitation was about; though Stella thought that papa looked very elegant and handsome and superior—that his white hands were as beautiful as a woman's—that his face was the most graceful and gentlemanlike imaginable—and that the whole thing, from the well-arranged curl on his forehead to the small, slim foot in blue silk socks and patent-leather shoes with broad ribbon bows, resting in a picturesque attitude on the crimson velvet footstool, was of the highest order of art that could be seen.

Perhaps Cyril would have preferred a general conversation; or better still, that happy garden where he found his own Paradise and made his Love's; and Stella would have followed his lead had he been able to give it. But of course this was all naughtiness, and had to be suppressed even from each other. It was *her* father who was boring him and to whom she herself was giving only a fragmentary attention—listening with her ears but not with her heart; and *her* father was almost as sacred to Cyril as to Stella herself.

The three listeners were wonderfully quiet; and by a strange chance Mr. Branscombe had forgotten to interrupt himself or stir up them for the last run of twenty minutes. The evening was sweet and still; the light was gradually waning. Booming beetles and ghostly miller-moths flew past the open window across the fragrant lawn; bats darted in slender lines of sudden darkness against the sky; the owls began to hoot in the woods; the last notes of the birds came in fitful signals sleepily from among the trees; a nightingale was giving out his song; the stars were just beginning to shine in the darkening blue where the crescent moon showed her silver streak; and the voice reciting that interminable epic became more and more monotonous in its artificial strain, more and more conducive to slumber, like the rustling of the wind in a corn-field, or the falling plash of water; when suddenly Mr. Branscombe interrupted himself with a short, sharp jerk.

"Why, Matilda, I do believe you are asleep!" he cried angrily, in a shrill, high-pitched voice.

"No, dear! no, I am not!" she answered, starting and raising herself. "No, I am not," she said again, with a strange expression of terror and disturbance on her face.

She sat up in her chair and looked round the room as if she saw nothing of what she looked at but did see more than was there. With both hands she pushed the hair off her face in a bewildered way; gave a deep sigh and shuddered as she had shuddered once before. Then she flung up her arms with a piercing shriek and fell back in her chair—dead! The aneurism had done its work, and that sudden, sharp awakening from her drowsy slumber had been the last strain which the dilated vessel would bear. She was dead. Her husband's poetry had at last killed her.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE LASH.

"WHAT a pity! What a thousand pities!" said Augusta Latrobe with cumulative sympathy when she heard the sad news, and how sweet, kind, patient Mrs. Branscombe had died as she had lived, without giving trouble to any one; with no parade of circumstance; quietly effacing herself to the last. "How I wish she had lived a little longer!"

"What is the use of wishing in that childish way?" replied Mrs. Morshead severely. "She went when she was called. That was enough for her; and ought to be enough for you and all of us."

"But if that call had only been put off for a little while!" said the graceless widow quite seriously. "If that poor dear Stella could have been married before it came!"

"Oh, yes, of course Stella's marriage is what runs in your head!" returned the mother with fierce sarcasm. "That is all you think of—all that any of you modern young women think of! Poor dear Mrs. Branscombe might have lived or died so far as she herself was concerned, and neither you, nor any one of your kind, would have cared. So long as that young minx had got her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe both might have died twenty times over, and not one of you would have thought twice of them, poor dear souls!"

"I don't think that," said Augusta tranquilly. "But as things are it only makes two sorrows instead of one. If Stella had been safely married it would have been so much out of the fire. And it does no one any good that she and Cyril Ponsonby should be unhappy."

"And you would have them married and that poor dear woman not cold in her grave yet?" said Mrs. Morshead. "Upon my word, Augusta, you are a nice kind of daughter, I must say! A mother is nothing to you, it seems—only a money-box that you can put your hand into when you want anything from her, and care no more about when you have done! As for thinking that you owe any duty to a parent—that you should be loving, obedient, respectful—oh, no! we are far too liberal for such old-fashioned notions nowadays! It is as much as we poor old people can expect if you young ones allow that we have the right to live at all. Why don't you get us all out of the way so that you can do what you like with what we leave?"

"To be sorry for Mrs. Branscombe's death does not look as if I did not care for mothers in general," said Augusta.

"Yes, but why are you sorry? For Stella's sake, not her own," retorted Mrs. Morshead.

"No, for her own," insisted Augusta. "I was very fond of Mrs. Branscombe—she was so gentle and sweet-tempered; and she was always very, very good to me, so I ought to have been fond of her—and I was."

"Perhaps her temper was not tried as some persons' is," said Mrs. Morshead grimly. "And remember, Augusta, it is not so difficult to be good-tempered with people when you do not see too much of them;" she added significantly. "The test is when you live with them, and learn all their disagreeable ways, and see their selfishness and heartlessness. Let Mrs. Branscombe have been tried as some people are, and I dare say she would have been no better than her neighbours."

"I think she was better than most," returned her daughter. "Every one knows what an amiable darling she was. She was a perfect angel!"

"You are always in extremes, Augusta. How I wish you would learn to be more moderate and sensible! But you always were one of the most exaggerating children possible; and I see no improvement in you—no sign that you are getting rid of your silly habit, which is nothing better than telling stories when you come to think of it."

Mrs. Morshead spoke angrily, and in her anger let some stitches drop in her knitting, which did not tend to improve her temper.

"It *is* a bad habit," said Augusta, who seldom cared to defend herself; "but one very difficult to overcome," smiling. "Big words come so natural to one."

"Naturally! A woman of your age, with a son to educate, excusing yourself like a silly girl, because it is 'natural,'" growled Mrs. Morshead. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Augusta. I am sure it makes me quite miserable when I think of that poor dear child, and how he is ruined by the way in which he is being brought up."

"I hope not quite ruined, mamma," said Augusta cheerfully. "I do my best for him; and on the whole he is a very good little man."

"He is a troublesome little monkey, that is what he is," said Mrs. Morshead crossly. "A good little man, indeed!—a tiresome little toad you mean;—always in some mischief or other! I met him yesterday in the garden with a beautiful large geranium in his hand. And now, Augusta, you will please to understand—I will not have that boy pick my flowers. Once for all—and I will not give you a second warning—if ever I find him with another garden flower, he shall not go near the beds again. He shall not break and destroy everything as he does, as if he were lord and master forsooth. Not in my lifetime, Augusta! When I am dead and gone you can do what you like—dance on my grave if you like—as I dare say you will. I don't expect much else from you. But while I am alive I am mistress; and I will not be trampled under foot by an undutiful girl and her noisy, impudent, troublesome little boy! I have seen too much of that kind of thing in others to submit to it myself. So I tell you in time."

"I am sorry if Tony picked the flowers," said Augusta. "He has strict orders not to do so, and I have never known him disobey."

"Then how did he get that geranium yesterday I should like to know?" said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Did it pick itself and put itself into his hand? I suppose that is what you will be saying next."

"He told me he found it lying on the Long Walk. Perhaps Page dropped it when he was bringing in the flowers for the table," said Augusta.

"He told a falsehood," returned Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Page never lets the flowers fall. And now he shall be punished for two faults instead of one."

Augusta said no more. She never encouraged a discussion of any kind on her little son, whom she kept out of her grandmother's sight as much as possible. It was the only thing to do; though for doing it she was of course blamed by her mother, as she would have been had she done the contrary. The terrible old woman had been a harsh mother even to her own child; to her grandchild she was simply cruel; though the little fellow was as good as the traditional gold of the nursery simile. Yet had he been a boy-angel come down from heaven she would have fallen foul of him for some fault evolved out of her own hard temper and spirit of opposition. It was for nothing wrong or even wilful that she rated him as she did. If quiet, she said it made her nervous to see a little fellow like that so unnaturally still, and she was sure he had water on the brain and was growing idiotic—or that he was sulky and deserved a whipping to get the black dog off his back. If lively and a little restless, after the manner of his age, she sent him out of the room with a rebuke for making too much noise—perhaps the verbal rebuke was translated into manual action, which effectually damped his childish gaiety and changed his merry laugh to bitter sobs. It was impossible for him to do right; for his very existence was the offence. Was he not the son of that disgraceful Professor Latrobe?—that penniless physicist who had married Augusta Morshead without making a settlement and had died without leaving her an income! And when Mrs. Morshead thought of this she wondered at her own goodness in receiving back to The Laurels at all her undutiful daughter and this living witness of her fault.

This marriage with a poor man who had been unable to provide for her, was the gigantic grievance of a life that had been one long chord of grievances—variation succeeding to variation, but the main theme—the wickedness of the world, and the ill conduct of all and sundry to herself—ever the same. Had Professor Latrobe been alive and wealthy Mrs. Morshead would have found some other peg on which to hang the pall of her dissatisfaction; as he was dead, and as he had died poor, she was spared the trouble of going farther; and the widow and the child had the benefit of her bitterness and complainings.

"And I will not have him brought up in these extravagant habits of yours," continued Mrs. Morshead, after a pause. "Considering that you have not a penny of your own, Augusta, and have to come to me for everything you want, I must say you are dreadfully extravagant, and might be more considerate. You never think of what things cost, and just squander away the money as if it were so much water or sand."

"I am very sorry, mamma, but I really did think I had been careful," said Augusta, who was, in truth, a marvel of economical resource and thriftiness.

"Careful! and there is that boy of yours in his best clothes to-day gone off to play with that little Turk, Nora Pennefather! You call that being careful, do you? I do not. A pretty mess he will be in when he comes back from that house, the most untidy, disorderly place in all Highwood! How you can let him associate with that horrid little girl I cannot think!"

"Why you see, mamma, Nora is the only child of Tony's age in the place; and it is good for him to have a playmate sometimes," said Augusta.

"Not such a forward little hussy as that!" retorted Mrs. Morshead. "Better be a nice well-conducted little fellow without playmates than go rampaging and racketing about with Nora Pennefather. The state he will be in when he comes home—all covered with jam or torn to tatters. I know! Where is the money to come from to support all this recklessness? It will end in my having to give up this place; I foresee that; and you might as well dig my grave at once as ask me to give up The Laurels! But I have not Fortunatus's purse, and I cannot do everything."

"His everyday clothes are really too shabby to be worn outside the garden," said Augusta. "I have mended and patched till I can mend and patch no more; and your grandson should be decent for your sake, you see," she added with a pretty smile and playful half-caressing accent.

"My grandson, indeed! A pretty grandson you have given—a beggar's child," grumbled the old woman.

"And now that we are talking of Tony's wardrobe, shall I go to Graham's and order a new suit for him?" continued Augusta, speaking as if she had not heard her mother's last words, speaking indeed as if it were quite easy to ask for what she wanted, and just as certain that she would get it when she asked for it. "He really is getting too disreputable!" she went on to say, her manner tranquil, however

perturbed might be her feeling; "and as his best suit is not over-fresh as it is, it will soon be worn out if he takes it into daily use, as he must very soon. Children knock their clothes out so frightfully!"

"Then he should be taught not to 'knock them out so frightfully,'" said Mrs. Morshead in reply. "That is just where I blame you, Augusta. You never teach him anything, never check, nor contradict, nor correct him from one day's end to the other. You let him do just as he likes—scamper all over the house, helter-skelter like a wild colt—run wild about the place—pull the flowers—tear his clothes—tell falsehoods—do just as he likes, as if he were a savage. And I have to bear the brunt and pay for all his mischief. And yet I am not allowed a voice in the matter. My goodness! you should have seen the way in which we were brought up! As if we dared to have disputed our mother's will, as you and that boy of yours dispute mine!"

"Dear mamma—I only wish to please you," said Augusta sweetly.

"Please me!" she grumbled. "It is an odd way you take, Augusta. For my part I do not know what the world is coming to. You young people and your children are just appalling. That is what you are."

"I am sorry you think I am doing badly by my child and you," said Augusta, a slight twitch about her lips though her voice was quite smooth and gentle. "But we have not settled about the clothes yet. Shall I order him a new suit at Graham's?"

"No," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "I will see to it myself. You are not to be trusted with anything, Augusta. Make out your list and let me look over it. If I do not keep an eye on you, goodness knows what folly you may not commit. I might as well have two children to look after," she added, twitching the knitted woollen shawl over her shoulders with an impatient pull. "I have everything to do; and you might be such a help to me if you would!"

"I would help you, mamma, gladly, if you would let me," said her daughter.

"Vex me by your incapacity and ruin me by your extravagance, you mean," was the ungracious response. "I wish I could trust to you; but how can I—such a light-minded feather-head as you are? Tell me what you want for that boy of yours, if indeed you know yourself what it is. Oh!"

as her daughter brought out a written list from her work-basket; "you have got it all cut and dried have you? Upon my word, Augusta, you have coolness enough for a dozen! That I will say of you. However, give it to me and let me see what you have had the conscience to put down."

Augusta rose from her place and came over to her mother, with the list of poor Tony's necessaries in her hand. The terrible old woman took the paper, readjusted her spectacles and read it, sotto voce, to herself. It was a very modest list—the least that could possibly be done with; but Mrs. Morshead read each insignificant item as if it were a question of nuggets and white elephants.

Her daughter continued her work of embroidering a silk jacket with bugles as quietly as if her heart had not sunk and her courage had not died. Of all the pains included in her dependent position, this of asking her mother for clothes for her child was perhaps the worst to bear.

At last Mrs. Morshead, looking over her spectacles and holding out the paper diagonally, came to the point.

"How can you be so absurd, Augusta, as to make out such a ridiculous list as that?" she said crossly. "Do you want the poor child to look like the beggar he is? Not while I have a sixpence to spend on his comfort and respectability! A black and white check for his best! It is an insult to me to propose such a thing. He shall have a velvet; and the black and white may do for every day. I cannot have him go about the world in the disgraceful state you think good enough for him. He is my grandson; and if you do not care for his appearance, I do."

"You are very good, mamma," said Augusta affectionately. "I am sure I am most grateful to you."

"Good? Of course I am good! Whoever thought I was not!" snapped the mother. "A great deal too good to you, such a tiresome, undutiful girl as you are; and so I tell you. But I will not have you say that I do not do my duty by your poor little boy. Poor fellow! He has only me to look to; and he shall not be neglected as you would be quite willing to neglect him, if I did not look after him."

Augusta made no answer. With the sweetest manner and the most unruffled sweetness of temper, she had a wonderful way of sticking to her point and dropping all side issues. She had accomplished her main purpose of the moment, and secured a new supply of clothes for her son; and whether her

mother took the tone of the child's protector against her neglect, or whether she had, which was just as likely, given her a severe scolding for extravagance, it was much the same to Augusta. The grant of the new supply was the bread; the manner in which it was made was the bitter sauce wherewith that bread had to be eaten. Still, the former was the essential fact, the latter only an adventitious circumstance; and while grateful for the one she must pass over the other as unimportant. Yet, oh! how ardently she wished that she could find her bread in any other cornfield than this thorny one of home!—that she could ensure her son's fortune by any other course than this of submission to her mother's tyranny and contempt! But until some other haven of refuge presented itself—would it ever?—she was bound to this, stony, inhospitable, grudging, as it was. And her only wisdom was to make the best of that which she could not mend and must perforce endure.

The conversation went no further on uncomfortable ways for the present; for soon after Mrs. Morshead had flung her last poisoned little shaft the servant announced "Mr. Kemp," and not even the terrible old woman was quite equal to the task of scolding her daughter as her greeting to a visitor. She contented herself therefore with an angry kind of grunt, as a tall, grave, quiet-mannered but pleasant-looking man came into the room and strode across the floor with the bearing of a soldier and the look of a king.

CHAPTER VI.

LIGHT AND SHADOW.

Looking first at Augusta with a slight smile of pleasure round his mouth and a certain gladness in his eyes, Sandro Kemp, the artist, formally greeted Mrs. Morshead before he spoke to her daughter, as it was but good breeding to do. But he greeted her as one to whom she was no bugbear, terrible as she might be to others; one who neither courted nor feared her, and who knew how to hold his own without interfering with her rights or suffering her to go beyond her own lawful boundaries and into his domain. The very core of Sandro Kemp's character was that grave and manly kind of dignity which neither takes liberties nor allows them—that

proud humility coupled with self-respect which makes a man acknowledge the shortcomings of his position in the world while conscious of his own intrinsic worth—that large kind of disdain for, yet submission to, social barriers and conventional hindrances which marks one who understands the higher laws of life but who will not impose his own convictions on another—that steadfastness to his own side and toleration for the side opposed to him, which proclaim the true liberal and the man with an educated conscience. Even his enemies—and he had enemies like others—were forced to admit that he was neither intolerant nor selfish; though such as Mrs. Morshead said that was only because he was latitudinarian for the one part and wanted to make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness for the other. For all that, when they took it in hand to circulate stories to his discredit, they had first to invent them.

There were not wanting some in Highwood with this faculty for creating fancy biographies; and Sandro had his full share of their unrooted flowers of imagination. He was unmarried, handsome, poor, a favourite with women, and of that plastic profession which gives a gentleman no standing of itself but is honourable or mean according to proficiency and emolument. Hence he was a fair target for the spears of the idle and the jealous; and among those who liked him least, and who were most anxious to find the weak places in his armour wherein to thrust their lance-heads, was the terrible old woman who held sway at The Laurels.

Sandro Kemp was indeed no favourite with Mrs. Morshead. He was only an architect; only an artist; a man who gave lessons when he could find pupils; who drew pictures for his amusement and designed houses for his daily bread; and Mrs. Morshead was always wanting to know what kind of profession that was for a man who called himself a gentleman? And he was poor. He lived in lodgings because he was not able to afford a house; and he was unmarried because he was not able to afford a wife, unless he could find one with money enough who would be silly enough to stoop to his condition. He paid his way honestly and punctually—so much must be admitted; "but what a way it was!" Mrs. Morshead used to say with disdain when she discussed Mr. Kemp's personal history, as she was prone to do—no one knew exactly why, for it was one which gave her no pleasure to contemplate. Especially was she prone to discuss him

with Augusta, and always with strange acrimony, as if seeking to indemnify herself for the restraint put on her by the irresistible dignity of his presence.

"Sandy Kemp," as she was fond of calling him, in derision for the somewhat affected name which had been imposed on him by a dilettante godfather, who coated the pill with a golden promise that he did not keep—"Sandy Kemp" might have committed some crime in the dark days of his obscure past for the doubt rising into certainty which she expressed of his character, and the dislike for his person which she always hinted had its full justification if only she might tell all she knew. "Sandy Kemp" was bold, and knew neither his place nor his betters, and some day she would tell him so. He should remember who he was, and how his position was one strictly of sufferance—architects and artists and queer people of that kind, not being gentlefolks like those who owned houses and lands and whose forefathers were lying decently in the churchyard, with mural tablets on the church walls to commemorate their names, dates and ages. And therefore, if "Sandy Kemp" had the good fortune to be taken notice of by those who were gentlefolks, he ought to remember that it was only out of benevolence, not because of his own merits. "Sandy Kemp" was first a Radical and probably a Freethinker, then a declared Communist and a professed Atheist, according to the ascending scale of her displeasure. And "Sandy Kemp" did not know his own mother tongue; for in a speech made at the school feast he said that he was "averse from" something or other; and who that understands the English language says "averse from," Mrs. Morshead would like to know?—an ignorant fellow like this setting himself up to speak and teach! It was enough to make the dead turn in their graves!

Though she tried hard, Mrs. Morshead could never induce Augusta to take up the cudgels in the artist's defence. Poor Augusta had enough to do with her own affairs and Tony's. She did not want more on her hands than she had already. When her mother was more than usually rabid concerning this one of her many bêtes noires, she would try to turn the conversation into some other channel; which always had the effect of making Mrs. Morshead more angry than before, and of concentrating her bitterness on herself. Still she carefully refrained from defending any one whom her mother chose to attack—Sandro Kemp or any other. And the sense of

drawing blank given by her imperturbable quietness made the terrible old woman more terrible still for want of attrition and a safety-valve. Just as the dentition of certain animals requires something which they can tear and gnaw, so did Mrs. Morshead's temper demand some one with whom she could quarrel. If Augusta would have gratified her in this, and would every now and then have had a wordy wrangle, perhaps things would have been better in the end, and she would have gained by the process. The air would have been cleared; the old woman would have got rid of her chronic ill-temper in fierce epithets and unjust accusations; she would have gratified her vanity by her cleverness in vituperation; and then the inevitable reaction would have set in and things would have gone better—until the next accumulation of moral thunder-clouds was dispersed by an explosion.

This possibility never entered into the calculations of that sweet-tempered, self-restrained and reasonable creature, her daughter. It seemed to Augusta the best policy to make herself round because her mother was angular, and to oppose smoothness to her spiky irritability so that both should not move on the same hard lines together, but that one might slip while the other struck. Acting on these principles she carefully abstained from taking up the glove so continually thrown down on Mr. Kemp's account; letting everything pass as blandly as if venomous insinuations were friendly praises and bitter accusations kindly confessions of interest and respect—which had the effect of making Mrs. Morshead still more inimical to the artist, and of late more disagreeable to, and somewhat suspicious of, her daughter. So that now when Sandro came into the room, and greeted her with the conventional: "How do you do, Mrs. Morshead?" she gave a curious kind of grunt rather than an answer, as she offered him two hard, inhospitable fingers, which she twitched out of his with an impatient jerk almost before he had taken them. But Sandro only thought within himself: "This terrible old creature is in worse form than usual to-day," looking anxiously to Augusta to see if any signs of trouble were visible on that fair, smooth, placid face. There were none. The young widow had learned not only to control herself but also her muscles; and she could make her face, when she chose, no more expressive than so much sweet and mindless wax-work. And this was what she made it now in answer to the artist's eyes.

"I suppose you have heard the painful news?" said Sandro, after he had been seated for a short time and had discussed the weather and the prospects of the harvest, foreign politics and home legislation, the bills which had to be passed and those which had been abandoned,—for Mrs. Morshead was a politician inter alia, and liked to air her theories. Those theories were always diametrically opposed to Mr. Kemp's ideas; of that he was very certain, whatever he might say. The terrible old woman would not have agreed with him had he echoed her own sentiments; and she set her heel on every independent assertion as if it had been a personal affront intended for her and to be resented accordingly.

"You mean Mrs. Branscombe?" she answered. "Yes, of course, we have heard it. There are always plenty of ravens in the world to come about you with their croakings and dead worms and things. No fear of not hearing of one's friends' death and ruin! What I should like to see would be a little more alacrity in letting me hear good news!"

She said this with a manner that seemed to accuse Sandro Kemp of Mrs. Branscombe's death; at the same time insinuating that he had no end of good things under his cloak, which he refrained from bringing out because of the inbred perversity and wickedness of his nature.

Augusta's delicate cheeks became a trifle deeper in tint.

"That poor Stella, how she will feel it!" she said hurriedly.

"They ought to have been prepared; it was their own fault if they were not," returned her mother grimly. "They knew that she had heart disease, and might be taken at any moment."

"But no one is prepared for the sudden death of one loved," said Sandro gently. "Love refuses to be influenced by any mere fact of mental knowledge."

"Oh, I am not clever enough for metaphysics," said Mrs. Morshead with a sneer. "I only know that we die when our hour has come, and that we ought to be prepared. All this extravagant grief is just rebellion against God's goodness; and no sentimentality can make anything else of it."

"I was not aware that there was any extravagant grief at Rose Hill," said Sandro quietly. "And do you call the recognition of the emotions sentimentality, Mrs. Morshead? We cannot speak of humanity without taking them into account."

"I call everything sentimentality that sets itself against

honest common sense," said Mrs. Morshead; "and everything Atheism that questions the plain will of God," she added significantly.

"That may be, but no one was advocating either the one or the other," said Sandro. "We were only talking of the shock that Mrs. Branscombe's sudden death must have been to them all at Rose Hill; and especially to poor Miss Branscombe who loved her mother so dearly."

"As to that I dare say she will manage to get over her shock in a very short time," said Mrs. Morshead with a vicious glance at Augusta. "Girls do not care, nowadays, so much for their mothers as to break their hearts when they go. A good riddance some would say—some not a hundred miles from here!"

"Would they? I do not know these young ladies," answered Sandro. "And at all events Miss Branscombe is not one of them."

"Miss Branscombe is no better than other modern young misses. She has her lover; and what do you think she cares for a mother dead or alive in comparison with that?" said Mrs. Morshead. "Mothers are only made for their children's convenience, according to the horrible doctrines of the present day. Children owe nothing to their parents—no love, no duty, no obedience—nothing! They live just for themselves and their own pleasures; for nothing else in the world; and that is modern daughterliness! I wonder it does not bring down a judgment from heaven, I declare I do!"

"Are we quite so bad as this, mamma? I don't think you really believe it!" said Augusta lightly, trying to give a brighter tone to the conversation.

Mrs. Morshead looked up from under her heavy frowning brows.

"I do not think *you* need ask," she said with sullen emphasis.

"No," said Sandro Kemp with perfect gravity and sweetness; "indeed Mrs. Latrobe need not. Every one knows her marvellous amiability and how superior she is both as a daughter and a mother. She is the bright example of the whole neighbourhood—a standard for all others to live by and come up to if they can."

"I wish them joy," said Mrs. Morshead, twitching her shawl, while Augusta laughed in her bright careless way; but those two pink spots on her cheeks burned somewhat

uncomfortably. "It is as well to have a standard, certainly," she continued lifting her lip, and showing her two eye-teeth as a dog shows his fangs when he snarls.

"They could not have a better," said Sandro, something burning on his cheeks too and passing, despite himself, into his eyes.

"When and where did you take your lessons in flattery, Mr. Kemp?" asked Mrs. Morshead, with a quick, suspicious glance from the artist's somewhat too eloquent face to her daughter's—serene, impassive, unmoved, save for that slightly-heightened colour. "Have you been to Ireland, may I ask?"

"And kissed the blarney stone?" he added with a smile. "No; nor have I had any lessons that I can remember. Perhaps, though, my mother gave them to me, when she used to tell me to look for the good in life rather than the bad, and never to be afraid of recognising beauty and virtue when I saw them."

"To my way of thinking, truth stands first of all things," said Mrs. Morshead. "Beauty and virtue are all very well when you find them; but I should like to know where you do."

"Often," said Sandro emphatically; "far more often than not; so that my principle of admiring what is lovely is identical with yours of confessing the truth before all things."

"The two are identical in Stella Branscombe; and so they were in poor dear Mrs. Branscombe," said Augusta.

How much she longed to change this second current of talk! Yet into whatever channel she might divert it, there was always the same danger of collision and disagreement.

"Mrs. Branscombe could not have been a very nice woman in reality to have ever married that contemptible old fribble," said Mrs. Morshead. "Of all the men I have ever known I think he is the most contemptible; and I have known some that came very near him." Here she looked at Sandro. "Still, he is about the worst, take him for all in all."

"Yours is a wide net, Mrs. Morshead," said Sandro. "At least, Mr. Branscombe does no one any harm; and if he has aspirations and ideas beyond his power of adequate expression, it is his misfortune rather than his fault."

"It is only his vanity that makes him attempt more than he can do," said Mrs. Morshead. "I am sure those ridiculous bits of poetry, that he prints in gold on glazed cards and sends about to all the neighbourhood make one ill to read

them, such horrid stuff as they are! I am a plain woman, Mr. Kemp, and speak plain English—which every one does not do."

"Vanity, or the need of occupation? Vanity, or the honest belief that he has done well, and that he gives his neighbours pleasure in reading and hearing what he has done? We must have some interest in life; and it is better to have one of a harmless kind, even though the execution be weak, than to spend one's time in idleness and gossip," said the artist.

"He has his home and his family, his estate and all the parish business that he ought to do, and does not. If he chose, he might have interest and occupation enough without writing bad poetry and painting worse pictures," snapped Mrs. Morshead.

"He would still have some unoccupied time on his hands," said the artist. "We men cannot employ our spare hours in doing the dainty stitchwork which comes so naturally to you ladies."

He looked at Augusta's length of silk with its traceries of bugles and beads.

"Then let him do some good with his time," said Mrs. Morshead. "We have poverty and ignorance enough among us—let him help these and leave his silly trash that he calls art alone! Art, indeed! Art is a bad business for a man when it is his profession and he has to get his bread by it; but when it does not do even this it is worse than child's play."

"Talking of art, Mrs. Latrobe, have you read the review of the Academy in the last week's *Saturday?*—it is the best that I have seen for a long time. I should like to know who wrote it. Whoever did, knew what he was about."

As he said this Sandro turned to Augusta with an imprudent sigh of relief. The sour temper and jangling contradictiousness of her mother had never tried him so much as they did to-day, and he had never pitied that sweet, fair woman so much as now when he thought of her hourly subjection to this hard domestic martyrdom.

"Are you praised in it, Mr. Kemp?" asked Mrs. Morshead with an unpleasant laugh.

"Yes, I have read it," answered Augusta hastily, her words breaking through her mother's. "It seemed wonderfully well done; very just so far as I could make out, and very appreciative."

"Oh, these things are all managed behind backs!" interrupted Mrs. Morshead. "Caw me, caw thee; that is the rule. That review was bought and paid for by every man who was praised in it. I would stake my life on it!"

"And I would stake mine that you are wrong," said the artist a little warmly. "Do you allow no honesty in the world, Mrs. Morshead?"

"As much as I can see through a microscope—no more," was the bitter reply.

"Ah, well, I do not agree with you," he said. "I believe in men and women as the best things we know, and I should be sorry to hold the pessimist doctrines which are so fashionable just now."

"And what may you please to mean by your 'pessimist doctrines?'" asked Mrs. Morshead, throwing a satirical emphasis on the words. "I am a plain, old-fashioned woman and have not learnt your modern jargon."

"Do you remember an old paper in the *Spectator* or the *Tatler*, I forget which?" said Sandro; "a paper where a parallel description is given of two women, Arachne, and Melissa? Arachne is the pessimist there; and pessimism means simply a belief in the sinfulness and wretchedness of humanity rather than in its goodness and aspiration; a delight in finding out the blemishes everywhere rather than in dwelling on the beauties; making ourselves unhappy in the shadow but not rejoicing in the sunlight; seeing the evil all around and denying the good. That is pessimism; and that is the fashionable philosophy of our day. To me it is morbid, sickly, untrue, and infinitely disastrous to the character of those who hold it and to the truth of things as they are."

"It is certainly a very suicidal kind of doctrine," said Augusta, as her contribution of rose-leaves. "It is so far more pleasant, as well as more charitable, to think well and not ill of people."

Just for one instant she lifted her eyes to the artist's face and looked at him as if in self-forgetfulness, her eyes full of sweetness and admiration. Then she let them fall on her work; and again that faint colour, which was her most marked sign of feeling, stole over her face and neck like the reflection of a rosy cloud on the snow.

He also changed colour as he looked at her with as much inquiry as earnestness. His eyes seemed to ask hers what was true, and what was only the appearance of things? Then

he passed his hand over his beard, according to a way he had, and checked a sigh as a man turning from a lovely picture which he could not hope to possess—from the vision of some sweet peaceful valley which he must not enter—turning back to the bare prose of his naked home, to the barren desolation of his toilsome way.

"Fools' paradises!" sneered Mrs. Morshead. "Believe in men and women when the best friend you have will buy and sell you for sixpence, and your very children are not to be trusted?—Rubbish, Mr. Kemp! and you know that you are talking rubbish! I prefer the truth."

"The whole contention is in what is the truth," said Sandro, passing over the accusation as if he had not heard it. "No one wants to hug himself in pleasant falsehoods; but we must never forget that there is just as much chance of untruth in disbelief as in credulity. The two things are the mere doubles of each other."

"And I say they are not," said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "And at my time of life I ought to know"

"Well! we shall never agree in our ideas of humanity and goodness," said Sandro rising to take leave. "We must be content to differ."

"I don't call having my own opinion on things differing from yours," said Mrs. Morshead rudely. "To differ there must be some kind of equality, and I don't see much equality between you and me, Mr. Kemp."

"No?" he said smiling. "Does not my man's wider experience in life make up, somewhat, for the greater length of yours?"

"Your man's wider experience as you call it may not perhaps have taught you the same things as mine has taught me," said Mrs. Morshead drily. "And I am not used to be compared to a young man like yourself, Mr. Kemp, young enough to be my son and without a stake in the country as we old proprietors have. When you compare yourself next time let it be with your equals!"

"I meant no offence to you, Mrs. Morshead," said the artist quietly.

"Then you should look before you leap, and think before you speak," she answered sharply; "and remember next time to whom you speak when you address a lady of my age and station!" "A most disagreeable pragmatical forward fellow," she said angrily to her daughter when Sandro had gone;

"and I wish to goodness he would not come here as he does. What does he want I wonder? The spoons? or is he wanting to borrow money of me? I hate his coming as he does with his long words and pedantic way of talking—argue, argue, argue, till one is almost dazed and stupefied. One cannot say a thing but he takes it up and makes some long nonsense about it. He is just the most unpleasant and conceited man in the place. His very name is enough to set one against him. Sandro Kemp! Why not honest Sandy at once? The affectation of that Italian is revolting."

"But that is not his fault exactly," said Augusta, when her mother stopped and looked to her for an answer. "He was christened Sandro, you know; he did not give himself the name."

"Then he ought to change it," snapped Mrs. Morshead, all alive with indignation. "And listen to me, Augusta, I am not going to have you defend that impudent fellow. A young woman like you ought to be more modest than this. What business is it of yours whether he was christened Sandro or not? Such forwardness! What next I wonder?"

As Augusta did not say what was to tread on the heels of her present iniquity, the conversation dropped, and for half an hour the peace of silence reigned between them.

Meanwhile, Sandro Kemp, walking back to his lodgings, asked himself again and again this one ever recurring and unanswerable question: "Did she mean it? did she mean it?"

CHAPTER VII.

IMPOSSIBILITIES.

It was the day after poor Mrs. Branscombe's funeral. The ceremonial had been of that gloomy magnificence which is supposed to relieve the hearts and assuage the sorrow of the bereaved and to show proper respect to the unconscious dead. No expense had been spared to make the whole thing a local fête draped in black and silver; and Mr. Branscombe's manifestations of mourning had all been as perfectly ordered and as artistically arranged as were the decorations of his house and the appointments of his studio.

The neighbours far and wide had been invited to join their tepid tears and transitory sorrow with the sacred grief of the

desolate widower and his motherless girl—to make-believe that the death of sweet and placid Mrs. Branscombe was a true tragedy in their lives, for which they put on spiritual mourning as well as the hatbands and scarves proper for the occasion. But it gratified Mr. Branscombe to see this large array of friendly mourners; and it gratified him still more to be able to pose before them as the heart-broken but still dignified and gentlemanlike victim of fate and sorrow. He translated into his voice and bearing on this day of woe, the old spirit of the aforetime Finery Fred, the lady-killer who used to study before his glass the looks and postures which he thought would be most convincing, and who trained his voice to the passionate accents and deep pathetic tones by which he hoped to carry the last lingering strongholds of doubt and fear;—of Finery Fred, the Beauty-man of his regiment, who went in for the leadership in taste and elegance and the "right thing to do," and whose highest ambition was to be a superior kind of M. C., and regimental Lord Chamberlain.

Sad as this occasion was, it was nevertheless one which called forth all his power. Wherefore he organized for his good Matilda the details of a funeral fit for a royal Princess, and laid in their quiet churchyard with overwhelming pomp the dead body of one who had lived but for her home and family and whose whole existence had been passed in modesty and self-effacement. And the neighbours came as they were bidden; and many of them laughed at the widower with his artistic despair, and said "What a mountebank that fellow was; and would anything ever teach him truth or simplicity!"

Still, the more intimate friends were really sorry for the loss of this gentle life from among them. There were some to whom she had been as an enduring exhortation to gentleness and love; and some to whom she had been as a faint and precious perfume, reminding them of the best days of their innocent youth and of spiritual graces perhaps long forgotten and laid aside. And to others she had been of more active help by her few words of wise counsel, by the crystal purity of her thoughts, and by that ready sympathy with their difficulties, either of mind or circumstance, which is perhaps the greatest help of all because having the most soothing influence.

Among those who mourned her with the sense of personal loss, Augusta Latrobe was foremost and the most sincere. She had lost not only a wise and real friend in Mrs. Brans-

combe, but her only confidante. To her alone had she ever dared to open her heart, to reveal her sorrows, to show the weight of the cross which she carried. By her death the young widow was made friendless, in the vital sense of friendship; and henceforth she must be sufficient for herself. It was a terrible loss for her; and to-day, when the air was stiller than usual after the sombre excitement of yesterday, she felt the blank that had come into her life more painfully than she had yet realized.

It was long since she had mourned as she was mourning now as she walked by the river-side—her little son now running before her, now loitering behind—her little son who made up the sole sunshine of her life, her only store of happiness and love! The song of the birds, the sound of the rushing waters, the sweet scents of meadow and copse and hedgerow which came round her like a cloud as she strolled onwards, scarce seeing where she went—the life and gaiety, the good health and beauty of her boy—all this was only dimly perceptible to her mind: while the loneliness of her life, the hard hand of her mother, the dreary necessities of her position, the crushing tyranny of the home in which she must perforce take shelter, the loss of her best and dearest friend, her only counsellor and confidante, were the prominent feelings of the moment and the terrible facts of her real existence.

"If only I could do something that would give me a home of my own and not hurt my boy's future!" she thought for the hundredth time since her husband's death. "If only poor Antonio had lived until the boy had grown up!" she thought again.

It was characteristic of Augusta that she made her son's welfare of more importance than her own loss in the death of her husband; with whom, however, she had lived in profound peace and concord—of itself happiness enough after the perpetual jangle of her mother's house. And indeed though she had not loved her shy, reserved, queer-mannered and odd-looking Professor as she knew that she could love had she the fitting chance, she had respected him very thoroughly and never let him feel that want of which she herself was conscious. Her sweetness and suavity had done all that love could have done, and had made him even happier than more passionate demonstrations would have made him. She was just the kind of wife that he wanted; and his marriage ful-

filled its intention with the most perfect smoothness. Among all her memories no shadow of remorse ever intruded its ghastly presence. She could not reproach herself with undutifulness or cruelty, with neglect of her husband's wishes or indifference to his happiness, nor feel aught but that she had made his last years blessed beyond any he had lived before. It had been a very pleasant, mild and rational kind of friendship. He had loved her more than he knew how to show or had had time to fathom; and she had not loved him at all. But she had made him happy all the same; which was the one thing needful.

Still, her heart was virgin and she had all the shy desires and timid dreams of one whose wealth of love has not yet been given. Only those who are conscious of their power of loving are conscious of the void; and she knew but too well what she had missed and what she had never felt. If it were possible! If she could! She knew what would make her life one long summer's day of blessedness:—a grave but kind and gentle man, strong, just, resolute, tender; a man who understood life and could see all round a subject; who was observant for the one part and thoughtful for the other; who would love her, but not blindly, so that he should help her to be her best self and would not, for the weakness which belongs to some men's love, foster her follies; a man who would be her superior and yet her lover, her king and yet her knight.

And thinking all this, letting her thoughts drift idly on the rainbow spanning the sky of hope, she came full on Sandro Kemp, leaning against the bole of an elm-tree, making a study of the rocks which just at this part broke the swift current of the river into a dozen small cascades.

Both started—Sandro so visibly that the thing confessed itself, but Augusta with a recovery so quick, so facile, as to hide her first confusion before it was seen. This sudden translation of her dreams into a personality shocked rather than confused her. And if her cheeks had that delicate pink flush which became her so well—the day was warm; the wood in which they found themselves was a little stifling despite the fresher breeze brought by the river; she had been running with her child; and she was naturally startled by coming on Mr. Kemp so suddenly—he standing there like the statue in Don Giovanni, she said with her frank laugh that seemed to clear the air and make wholesome sunshine round her as she stood.

Yet Sandro would have been more content if she had not laughed in that clear, light, bright way; if she had blushed more and stood with more consciousness of embarrassment and strain; if she had been less like her usual wise and self-controlled self and more like the normal shy and maybe silly school girl.

Having stumbled on him in this way, it was the most natural thing in the world that the widow should stay and look at the artist's work; and, having looked at it and praised the force here, the tenderness and subtlety there, it was also the most natural thing in the world that she should turn over with him the pages of his sketch-book and hear the history of this crocket and that finial—where he found this quaint fifteenth-century gable, and where this thirteenth-century, massive, square and nameless tower. These things came into his professional work; while sketching rocks was only his pastime to be taken up between whiles, when business was slack, as alas! it generally was.

He had good hopes now, however, of making his name and showing what he could do, he said. Had he put his meaning into the ordinary words of the unsuccessful, he would have said—of turning the corner which he had been so long in rounding. And when he told her of this hope of permanent fame, he showed her a rough sketch of his design for a stately palace about to be built not far from Highwood by a millionaire from Cottonopolis. He had sent in his design with other competitors and hoped he should be the winner. If he were, the corner would indeed be turned and the smooth, straight road of fortune, fame and success fully entered on!

"Oh! you must get it!" said Augusta quite simply, but warmly too—perhaps warmly because simply. "This is so fine that I am sure you cannot be distanced by any other competitor. What a grand design it is! I have never seen anything more perfect, more beautiful!"

"And I have never received more precious praise," said the artist in a slightly tremulous voice, looking right into her eyes.

Augusta's face, which had been sincere, animated and sympathetic, took on itself that mask of mindless amiable wax which she could assume whenever she pleased.

"I am glad if my praise pleases you," she said; "but," laughing, "you must remember that I am quite ignorant of art and that I may admire what is really all wrong."

"If you admire at all, that is enough for me," said Sandro with dangerous fervour.

Augusta raised her eyes. She did not look straight into her companion's face, but just a little below his mouth.

"Surely not," she said quite gravely. "Your object is to succeed with the authorities, not to be praised by private friends."

"By some, not all. The commendation of some would be all-sufficient for me."

"I should prefer the fame and the money for my own part," she answered with an exasperating, prosaic, unsympathetic hardness, as unlike her warmer self as night is unlike the day.

Sandro looked at her half-puzzled, half-pained.

"The day is warm," he then said; "and this place is so lovely! Will you not sit here for a little while? We can watch your boy that he does not get into mischief; and see! this fallen tree makes an admirable seat."

The widow hesitated for just half a moment, then a certain resolute look stole like a film of ice over her soft eyes; her mouth grew hard and her lips were drawn together; her graceful, supple figure seemed to stiffen, and she looked like one who has suddenly taken a difficult resolve and who means to keep it.

"Yes," she said; "I will sit down for a little while. You can play about, Tony," she called out to the child; "but do not go too near the water."

"Oh, that is fun!" said the boy, as he scampered off—rejoicing in his freedom and forgetting the sorrowful lessons of his life at home and the sour hard visage of the grandmother who always rated and never caressed, always blamed and never praised.

"He is a noble-looking boy," said Sandro. "You may be congratulated on having such a son."

Like many of his tribe he was passionately fond of children, and, like Robert Southey, thought no home perfect that had not a kitten and a "child rising two" among its inmates.

"He is a dear little man," answered Tony's mother fondly; "and he gives very little trouble. He is high-spirited and all that, but he is so affectionate that I can guide him by a word. He rebels against scolding, and injustice makes him naughty; but he yields easily to kindness and fair dealing."

"Love is the best trainer for a child, just as affection is his best conscience," said Sandro. "Weakness, vacillation,

want of fixed principles of action and all forms of injustice spoil children as rust spoils steel; but healthy love—never! Love spoils no one," he added, again looking at his companion with meaning.

"No, it does not," she answered, as tranquilly as if she had been talking of the weather or the state of the roads. Then, seeing that he seemed to wait for something more explicit than this cut and dried assent, she added: "But it is just the thing we have to learn to live without. We cannot all be loved."

"Why not?" he asked eagerly. "Surely there is no one in the world who might not be loved if he—or she—would accept what was offered. You yourself——"

"Oh! I am out of the question altogether," she interrupted, laughing lightly. "I have my mother to attend to and my darling boy to live for. When I said that we had to do without love, I meant many of us, not myself. I have all I can have—or care for."

"All you care for? Do you never think of making a new home for yourself—building up the shattered temple of your life?"

"With new decorations?" she answered brusquely. "Never!"

Sandro turned pale and looked again at the boy.

"Yet he would be better for a man's care," he said very gently.

She sighed softly, and the ice that had come into her eyes seemed suddenly to melt into something that looked like tears.

"Yes. I grant that," she answered in a low voice. "But I must do the best I can for him by myself. It would be impossible for me to marry again unless——"

She stopped.

"Unless what?" he asked, bending down his head as if to hear her answer more distinctly, and again looking full and fixedly into her face. He shifted his hand uneasily, and she knew that he checked the impulse to take hers.

"Well! unless I married one so rich as to ensure my boy's future should my mother disinherit him and me—as she would were I to marry again."

Augusta Latrobe spoke with the greatest apparent ease and frankness. The pink flush had fixed itself into burning red on her cheeks; her eyes were hard; her lips curiously

dry. But save these small indications of strain, her air and voice and manner and expression were all as careless and undisturbed as even Mrs. Morshead could have desired.

"You see I am a very mercenary commonplace kind of person," she went on to say, not looking at Sandro but gazing straight before her across the river in the most untroubled and the frankest way imaginable. And yet—the flower held in her hand wavered so much that she laid it on her lap, and the beating of her heart was so quick and strong it shook the fringe of her cape as if the wind had blown it. "And, being commonplace, I do not deceive myself; and I never allow myself to dream," she continued in a matter-of-fact manner that cut into Sandro's very soul. Yet why should it? "I have to stay with my mother for the sake of my boy—stay with her, as I am now, for as long as she lives. Or, if I leave her, I must have my child's fortune assured. I could not wreck his future for my own present happiness. I must not. So you see I have no temptation to marry again; which simplifies my life so far."

Sandro did not speak. That something which comes into the throats of men and strangles their words had come into his, and he had to wait until he had mastered himself and his voice. He wondered why she had said this to him. Had she seen? and did she wish to warn him in time so as to spare him the humiliation of a refusal? Or was it just the natural outcome of her candour and simplicity? And was her quietness real or assumed?—the expression of serene indifference or the effort made by pride and will over a woman's weakness and a woman's desire? He had thought—well! no matter what! Her words were plain and to the point, and thoughts and dreams go for nothing in the face of a direction so distinct. He must accept things as they were. An image might be broken but the shrine remained intact, and none could prevent his carrying his worship in secret where he might not make his devotions in public.

"And you never feel the want of a friend?" he asked after a long silence, during which she still looked across the river at the landscape beyond, her lips set into that hard fixed smile which expresses anything rather than joy or pleasure.

He did not look at her when he spoke, and his voice was low, rough and husky.

The smile passed from her lips and she ceased to gaze at that rich pasture-land before her.

"A friend? yes, indeed; I do feel the want of a friend," she said quickly. "Heaven only knows how much! how much, indeed, now that the only friend I had, sweet Mrs. Branscombe, is gone! But that, too, is not in my possibilities," she added, as if taking herself again in hand. "You see my mother is old and difficult, and she would not allow me to have a close friendship with any one, man or woman. I have to walk warily to keep even so much liberty as I have now."

"But you said just now that Mrs. Branscombe was your friend," he returned jealously.

"One more intimate than frequent," she answered. "I did not see her often; but when I did she was everything to me."

"And you cannot replace her?"

"No."

"Yet others would be to you all that she was," he said.

"It cannot be. My mother would not allow it," she answered.

"What a life! What a life!" he said indignantly.

"It cannot be helped," she answered. "It is for my boy."

"And I can be of no good to you?" he asked with a sudden outburst of feeling. "Can I bring you no happiness? Cannot I lighten your burden by ever so little? You might do so much for me—you do already—can I do anything for you?"

"You are always good to me—always," she answered. "But you can be of no vital use to me, nor can I be of real good to you," she added with meaning.

"Not as a simple friend?" he asked.

"No, not even as simple friend," she replied. "There is no use in denying what all the world knows already that my mother has an uncertain temper, and that it is rather hard to live with her. Nothing but the most complete self-control, as well as the most careful attention to her wishes and avoidance of all that she dislikes, would help me through at all; and nothing but the knowledge that it is for my boy's future would make me endure it. So far I will speak frankly. But I am simply on sufferance; and I have no more power at home than if I were a paid companion—and indeed not quite so much, for then at least I should have the power of leaving. I dare not ask any one to come and see me—not you, nor Stella Branscombe, nor old Colonel Moneypenny"—"I am glad she calls him old," thought Sandre—"nor Hortensia

Lyon; in fact no one. I am of course always glad to see you—or Stella, or any one," she added hurriedly, as a check on the sudden brightness that flashed into his face; "but I should not be glad to see any of you often, for that would make my life more uncomfortable than it is already and would react in greater harshness on my boy. So that you see," she said, and now she looked at him frankly; "I am just as unable to have a friend who would be of real use to me—a friend in any true intimacy—whether man or woman, as to have a husband."

"But this miserable existence—this awful slavery—who but you could bear it!" he cried. "You can, because you are an angel—the one perfect woman of creation!"

"Because I am a cold-blooded calculator," she answered lightly; "and pride myself on my common sense and reasonableness. There is only one of two things to be done in life, Mr. Kemp," she added, turning to him with a strange air of confidence—had he been vain he would have given it a warmer name; "Break or Bear. What we cannot bear with patience let us break with resolution; but when we cannot do this and must endure, what folly to make things worse by fretting and repining! Six years ago I broke my bonds, as you know; but I had to come back to them again, and under harder terms. Now I cannot break them again, save under conditions which do not present themselves; so I have made up my mind to bear them, if they last my whole lifetime. There is nothing else to be done; don't you see that?"

"I see that you are the noblest woman living," he answered in a suffocated voice; "and that poverty is a greater curse than I have ever felt it before. If it had not been for that miserable old godfather of mine I should have been rich, like my brothers—given a profession that would have ensured me an income, and left equal with the rest by my father's will. My whole life has been sacrificed to a lying promise—a delusive hope! And now for the first time I know its full bitterness—the real meaning of the curse!"

"Let that pass," she answered quickly. "You cannot alter your position any more than I can alter mine; and you too must bear with the dignity of patience what hurts and galls you in your life—as also must I. We are friends in fact, though we cannot say so to the world. Besides, why should we?" she said, taking back her light and careless manner. "There is no such solemn compact in two people liking

to talk to each other when they chance to meet, and on the whole feeling more esteem and sympathy for each other than not. This is the sum total of our friendship—not a very formidable affair when we think of it!"

"More than this," he pleaded.

"No more. This is all," she returned.

"You can give me no more than this? You would give as much to a mere acquaintance."

"I can have only mere acquaintances," she answered. "I have told you that my mother will not allow me to have more."

"Not even a friend, such as I would be—humble, sincere, devoted, asking only the privilege of serving you and of being sometimes useful, and always faithful?"

He spoke as if his very life depended on her answer. With the natural contradiction of human nature, the clearer her path, the firmer her decision, the more reluctant he was to follow the one or accept the other.

Again the widow looked across the brawling river to the green and quiet pastures beyond. Her soft face took a half dreaming, half yearning, look, and her grey eyes were dark and tender. Then with an effort she seemed to come back to herself, to reality, to resolution, to strength.

"Impossible!" she said firmly. "Such a friendship would be my ideal of life, my all of happiness; but it is utterly and entirely impossible! Never let us speak of it again. It would be cruel on your part and weak on mine. We know where we stand; and anything else, as I have said, is impossible." Rising, she called out to the child: "Come, my Tony, we must be going home, my little man. It is your tea-time."

"And is this the last time I shall ever see you alone?" asked Sandro feverishly.

"That depends on accident," she answered with well-feigned tranquillity. "We do not often stumble over each other like this—do we?"

"If I knew your habits—when and where it was most likely to meet you!" he returned.

She looked at him a little reproachfully.

"To be soon the talk of Highwood?" she said. "No. When things have to be done, the only rational way is to do them thoroughly. I have given myself to my child and I must think only of what is best for him. To have it said that

his mother was a flirting widow who walked abroad with gentlemen, would never do! And you would be sorry to be the cause of this."

"Unless——" he began.

She stopped him with her eyes, they were so calm and clear and icy.

"There can be no unless," she said quietly. "I have my duty marked out for me, and my path is too clearly traced to miss, except by wilful wrong-doing. I have to live for my boy; to do what is best for his future and to forego all that might be pleasant to me if it should be hurtful to him. Do you not see this? Yes. I know that you do So good-bye."

She held out her hand. To judge by her manner only, this interview had told him nothing, and these last words had cost her no effort.

"Good-bye," said Sandro, not so steadily as she had spoken. Then he added impulsively: "Let me give you this sketch. It will be a little memento of our talk to-day; and this talk has fixed the boundaries of my life."

"Yes; give it me," she answered.

As she spoke she drew her veil over her face and turned away her head. When she turned back again the gauze was wet, but she said in a light, hard, mocking tone:

"A study of rocks suits me exactly! You know the contempt I have for softness and sentimentality and how I prize strength and self-control! Good-bye!"

Once more their hands met but not their eyes. The widow was looking at her boy, that set smile again on her lips; and Sandro, looking at her almost as one looks at a dear face dead, felt as if she had suddenly left his world and had gone to some other sphere where he could not follow her and might not reclaim her to his own.

"Good-bye," he said mournfully; "and God bles you. If ever you want me you know where I stand, and how much you can rely on me!"

"Come, my little man!" said the widow in a strained unnatural voice. "Wish Mr. Kemp good-bye, and come home to tea."

"Ask Mr. Kemp to come too," said the child.

She laughed in a harsh odd way.

"That would never do!" she said. "Good-night!" she added as she hurried away before the artist could speak.

When well out of sight she suddenly stopped and kneeling on the ground took the child in her arms, kissing him with feverish fervour.

"Tell me that you love me, Tony!" she said, holding him to her.

"I love you," repeated the boy, patting her face. "Dear, sweet, pretty mamma, I love you so much—but, oh, mamma, pretty mamma, you are crying! What are you crying for? Has Mr. Kemp hurt you? Let me go back and beat him."

"No," she said, mastering herself with an effort; "Mr. Kemp has not hurt me and I am not crying now, Tony. See! I am quite well again, and nothing is the matter," she added, laughing spasmodically. "And now let us run a race, and see who will get to that gate the first!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS BETTER CHANCES.

Meanwhile Sandro Kemp went back to his old attitude and occupation—leaning against the bole of the elm-tree while sketching the rocks, covered above watermark with flowers and tender seedlings, by which the calmer sweep of the river was broken into those thousand tossed and troublous cascades. It was an emblem of his life, he said to himself; and he did well to fix the lines which should remind him of his broken hopes, his tranquillity and peace destroyed for ever; all because of that sweet, fair woman whom he loved so well, and, as she had made him understand, so hopelessly.

He knew now his fate; unless, indeed, a greater share of success should come to him than he dared to hope. Yet if his wildest dreams should indeed be realized!—if that palace for the cotton-lord should be given him?—and that other great chance, that grand cathedral for which he was now planning and studying and striving? Well! he should then be famous, and on the high-road to wealth as the result. But would it not still be wealth of that uncertain kind which depends on the life of the bread-winner? And would Augusta change the certainty of her inheritance for the mere chances of one man's life?

Were she alone in the world, and had she not already made

trial of the same kind of thing—then he might hope and believe; but with her little son, and after what she had said, it seemed, indeed, impossible! If her husband, the Professor, had lived long enough to perfect his great work, he too would have been wealthy and world-renowned; but he died before he had proved his theory, before he had consolidated his fame and by that consolidation turned it into enduring cash; and who could tell but that the same fate should not overtake himself? Still, he would not be craven although he was hopeless. He would work as steadily for her friendly approbation and for his own self-respect as if he might still have hoped for her love and its rich reward. The sunshine had gone out of his life, but he would not whimper because it was prematurely night.

All the same, he felt as if he had suddenly lost his way somehow; as if his life had fallen asunder and he had to reconstruct it out of the fragments; as if something had died and some one had left him; and as if the spur which had pricked forward his ambition had become blunt and useless.

He made his sketch however, with the conscientious care characteristic of all his work—yet how sombre in tone and low in key, how mournful in spirit that pictured story of the rocks!—and then he put up his materials and went slowly back to the little cottage where he had made his home.

It was only a six-roomed cottage, but it was one of the prettiest little places in the neighbourhood. Set on a slight eminence, it commanded a view of the whole rich valley, with the winding river that ran so rapidly to the sea—that sea itself ruling the horizon with a narrow line of shining silver—while to the back the wild and picturesque fell-country was rounded off as by a frame by the blue heights of the distant mountains. The small town of Highwood lay clustered in the hollow; and the houses of the gentry, each standing in its islet of green, whether of park, of garden, or of leafy wood, broke up the monotony of the pasture-lands which were the chief wealth of the vale. The garden of this little cottage—Fernacres, as it was called—was famous for its roses, its carnations, its pansies, and its early fruit and vegetables. Both Sandro and his landlord—James Prinsep, the schoolmaster—spent a great deal of their spare time in this little plot of ground; and the result was more than satisfactory. Fernacres was ahead of even the grandest places in the valley; and the finest flowers grown in the open air, as well as the

first dish of peas, of strawberries, and of new potatoes, were sure to come from this sunny little slope.

Mrs. Prinsep had been a lady's maid at Rose Hill—Jane Durnsford's predecessor; and she had added to a naturally gentle and refined nature the lessons in grace and moral culture given her by contact with Mrs. Branscombe. She was one of the true ladies of womanhood; and lady enough not to be ashamed of domestic work. Hence she kept the place in the most exquisite cleanliness and order; she cooked to perfection; and she made her lodger as happy as any poor bachelor whose thoughts are running on the unattainable, can be. It was altogether the most modest kind of home that could be imagined for a man in the prime of life; but it suited Sandro Kemp when he first entered on it; and he had gone on with it longer than he originally intended because of those grey eyes and fair hair, that soft face, sweet voice and strange combination of gentleness and will which sometimes he was able to see, either at The Laurels, or elsewhere.

As he came home now from his sketching expedition by the river, Mrs. Prinsep, watching for him from the window of her own little parlour—that which corresponded to his, on the other side of the door—noticed how pale he looked and how heavily he walked.

"He studies too much," said the kindly woman with a sigh.

Those boards and queer implements—T squares, compasses and the like—those flimsy sheets of yellowish and transparent paper, with their black and red lines, their squares and hieroglyphics—those wonderful pictures of houses and churches and nondescript buildings, with scales of measurement and more hieroglyphics underneath were sore trials to her patience as a housekeeper and to her sympathies as a woman. She longed to dust that writing-table against the window where Sandro kept this professional litter; but this was the one sacred space which no profane hand must invade; and the poor woman was forced to let alone all those smeared little saucers of red and black and blue—all those messed plates and dust-covered sheets of paper and parchment;—contenting herself with supplying clean tumblers of fresh water and sometimes going the length of dusting about the free corners.

If this were a trial to her housewifely pride of order her lodger's habits and hours touched her womanly sympathies quite as much. Over and over again, hours and hours after

she and her husband had gone to bed, she had heard Sandro's footfall on the stairs, and had struck a light to see the hour. Two, three, and even past three it had been—and he hard at work all that time with his houses and churches! No wonder that he looked pale at times; or that at times he was so silent and sad she had half a mind to ask him what ailed him. He was just killing himself with overwork; and apparently to not much good. He was as poor now as he was when he first came there. Though he paid her punctually and did not owe a penny in the town, her fine woman's wit told her that he had not sixpence to spare from the bare necessaries of life; and to toil as he did, early and late, for no good, was what she could scarcely call good sense:—though it was Mr. Kemp who did it; and, save her own James, Mr. Kemp was to her mind the best man that ever lived and the most of a gentleman. Mr. Branscombe was as fine as if he were a prince; and their dear good rector, in whose house she had also lived—her first place as nurse-girl—was the best clergyman that could be; but Mr. Kemp had something in him better than either. She did not know what it was exactly, she only felt it; and as he had no mother to see to his things, and no sister to live with him as his companion, Mrs. Prinsep thought herself consecrated to the task of taking care of him. And she fulfilled her self-imposed mission as few would have done.

"I am afraid your dinner will be a little spoilt, Mr Kemp," she said, coming to meet him in the narrow slip that stood for a hall.

"I know that I am late," he answered with a pleasant smile; "so I cannot blame you, Mrs. Prinsep."

"And there is a letter for you from Rose Hill," continued the schoolmaster's wife. "Mr. Branscombe's own man brought it and seemed put out that you were not at home. He said he was told to bring back an answer."

"Where is the letter?" asked Sandro not very eagerly.

He had liked Mrs. Branscombe sincerely and he admired and liked Stella; but Mr. Branscombe was as antipathetic to him as the traditional oil to vinegar; and though he had defended him when Mrs. Morshead had fallen foul of him, chiefly because of his innate dislike to censure and harsh criticism, yet he took care to keep out of his way as much as he could, and to make his intercourse with Rose Hill one of the rare events of his life. It was a surprise to him then that Mr. Branscombe should have written to him; and he won-

dered what he could possibly have to say. Nevertheless he was not specially eager to know; and even when Mrs. Prinsep handed him the letter he laid it aside unopened until he should have finished his dinner. But before he had got half-way through his cold beef and salad, the little gate of the garden swung open and the Rose Hill livery of black and silver came up the narrow walk in earnest of the dilettante's impatience.

"Mr. Branscombe has sent for an answer, sir, to his letter," said Mrs. Prinsep, coming into the room.

"By George! I had forgotten all about it and have not opened it yet," said the artist, tearing at the envelope—which was black-bordered to such a depth as to leave scarcely room for the address. He found inside the sketch of a monument in vile perspective and worse taste; with a letter from Mr. Branscombe, begging him to undertake this small commission, and put into workable form the crude ideas hastily jotted down on the enclosure. If Mr. Kemp would do Mr. Branscombe the favour of coming to see him at Rose Hill, say, this evening—or to-morrow morning, if that would suit him better—they might be able to confer together on the mournful subject of this communication and perhaps come to an understanding more quickly than they could do by letter.

To which Mr. Sandro Kemp returned for answer a short note, written in the third person as Mr. Branscombe's had been, saying that he would do himself the pleasure of waiting on him this evening

"I will not give him my best working-hours in the morning," he said to himself; "and I am too much out of trim to-night to do any good at home; else that Cathedral ought not to stand even for this. Still it will be pleasant to design something good and beautiful for the dear woman. And Augusta Latrobe will see it."

After which he continued his dinner, the vision of a simple, touching and well-composed monument gradually clearing itself in his mind, in direct opposition to the florid and meretricious composition, all of cherubs' heads and angels with trumps and inverted torches, of broken columns wreathed with flowers and crowns and crosses at the base, which represented Mr. Branscombe's idea of a fitting memorial to his good Matilda so "sorrowfully departed this life."

"We shall disagree, of course," said the artist again to

himself. "But unless he will give me carte blanche I will not undertake the thing at all. I will not put my brains into such stuff as this, to make it in any way workable!" he added, with a second contemptuous glance at the sketch enclosed. "Not a line right; not an idea that has not been worked to death; and the whole thing just one heterogeneous jumble of horrors!"

As he said this, aloud this time, the garden-gate swung back for the second time and the postman came to the door. They had a double post at Highwood, and the evening letters were often the most important of the day. Mrs. Prinsep brought in two. One was large and official, the other was in an unknown hand; but the post-mark was the London S.W., where his eldest brother lived.

He opened the first, knowing that in it was contained his fate so far as the cotton-lord's palace was concerned. For a moment he held his breath, and Mrs. Prinsep, taking away the dinner-things, could not help noticing that he turned deadly pale. Then the colour came back in a flood on his face, and his brightest smile flashed over it like sunlight, as he lifted up his eyes to Mrs. Prinsep watching him so tenderly, and for need of some one to share his gladness called out: "Well, Mrs. Prinsep, you are to keep me for a little while longer yet! I have that house at Hillside to build!"

"I *am* glad of that, sir," she answered smiling. "I should be sorry to lose you now that you have been with us so long. And it is a good thing for you too, is it not, sir?"

"Yes;" he said with a happy, boyish laugh. "It is a very good thing, Mrs. Prinsep. I shall have to give you that silk gown I promised you. What did we say it was to be—blue or green?"

"No, no, Mr. Kemp! You are to do nothing of the kind," she said, also laughing for sympathy. She checked herself in an instant. Her dear former mistress—her ever good and generous friend—had been buried only yesterday; and this was not the time for what her Scotch aunt would have called "daffing."

"And I shall not wear colours for a year to come," she added gravely. "Mrs. Branscombe was one of my greatest losses."

"Then it shall be black silk," said Sandro, also gravely; "and you are a good, true-hearted, affectionate creature."

After this he opened his second letter, and found it to be from his brother's housekeeper—the three Kemp men were unmarried—saying that her master was ill but that he was not to be alarmed; not much was the matter, and if he got worse she would let Mr. Sandro know. He had had an accident in the park; had been thrown from his horse which had rolled on him and hurt his chest; but though he could not write, because his arm was powerless, and though he was in bed, there was not much amiss; and Mr. Sandro should hear regularly and need not be uneasy.

"Poor old fellow!" said Sandro, as he read the letter. "I hope he is not much hurt. I wish he had not said so pointedly that I need not bother. I should have so much liked to have seen him. It would not have cost much to have run up to town. But he always means what he says, and I should only annoy him if I went."

And with this he crushed the letter into his pocket and, taking his hat, set out for Rose Hill and the inevitable fight over Mr. Branscombe's "crude ideas."

In this fight Sandro came off victorious. To be sure, he had to be very careful, very cautious, very gentle in his work of demolition; and, while holding fast by the matter of his design, to be wary in his method. For it was a rather hard task, all things considered, to have to tell a wealthy man, intensely vain of his own artistic skill, that his work was all wrong from first to last—the design bad, the drawing worse, the thing inadmissible and impracticable—and yet not affront susceptibilities which were wounded as easily as a mimosa-plant is made to droop. But Sandro did it. He had that rare mixture of gentleness and frankness which can speak unwelcome truths without offending those who have to hear them; and as Mr. Branscombe had sense enough to understand what was good when he saw it, and as Sandro's hasty sketch made in the studio while the two were conferring, had in it the manifest germ of a grand idea and a great success, he allowed himself to be over-persuaded, and to leave the thing in the more competent hands of the professional artist.

But he indemnified himself for his displacement by saying to Stella and Cyril, when he showed them Sandro's rapid sketch:

"We worked out this between us. Mr. Kemp confessed that my original idea was the grander and more luxuriant

conception, but there were certain technical difficulties in the working which made it scarcely feasible. This he considered to be more practicable; and I own I like my second idea almost as well as my first."

"I like it better, sir," said Cyril.

"So do I, papa," said Stella—the poor innocents!

On which Mr. Branscombe answered a little peevishly:

"I cannot say much for your taste, my dear Stella—as for you, Cyril, I know that you have no more artistry in you than a log. The original idea was infinitely the better of the two, and, as I explained to you, was abandoned solely because of certain technical difficulties in the working out."

"Whatever you do, papa, is beautiful," said Stella, going up to him and kissing him. "How I wish that mamma could have seen it!" she added naïvely, tears coming into her eyes at the mention of her mother's name.

"She will; and she will know that she is honoured," said Mr. Branscombe pompously.

The phrase jarred on Cyril strangely and involuntarily he uttered an exclamation which meant a disclaimer both of the sentiment and the manner of uttering it.

"What an odd thing to say!" he thought. "That father-in-law of mine has certainly some queer corners in his mind. He is as unlike my Stella and her beloved mother as if he were of another race; and I am glad that my Stella is more her mother's child than his."

On his side, Mr. Branscombe, who had heard that "Oh!" thought—for so elegant a man a little savagely: "You have very nearly come to the end of your tether, young man; and this inconvenient farce has to be hissed off the boards!"

CHAPTER IX.

HER FATHER.

It had to be done. Therefore, argued Mr. Branscombe, it were well that it should be done at once and while his daughter's heart was more plastic even than usual through grief at her mother's death—that death which was just a week old to-day, closed by the gorgeous funeral which had given the neighbourhood its solemn fête the day before yesterday.

The moment was favourable and the hour had come. Cyril had ridden over to the county town on a planned errand, simulating "business at the bank" for Mr. Branscombe. Thus he was safely disposed of for the afternoon. His absence would enable his prospective father-in-law to lay down the lines of the future without fear of interruption; and Mr. Branscombe knew that Stella would keep to those lines when he had once made it clear to her that they represented his will. He counted on her filial fidelity, cost what it might, and that she would make her action coincident with his desire, subservient to his advantage, even at her own loss and martyrdom. Among the multiform chances of life his daughter's rebellion to his command, or indifference to his wishes, was the last which the mind of Mr. Branscombe could entertain.

He foresaw that Cyril would be more difficult to manage; but, with Stella on his side, the young fellow's force of resistance would be reduced to a minimum. If a farce has to be hissed off the boards, he thought, looking at himself in the glass and sadly noting the crow's feet about his eyes, of what good the actors' refusal to budge? They must go; the public will not hear them.

"And in this matter I am the public," said Mr. Branscombe aloud; "and this undesirable engagement is the farce that has to be hissed off the stage of my life. Stella is too useful to me now to be parted with; and India is an unhealthy climate. I am doing my duty to her as well as to myself; and in time she will recognize this and thank me."

On which he lowered the blind so as to make a mournful and subdued light in the room; put himself into a becoming attitude of grief and dejection; rang the bell with plaintive softness; and, when the man came asked him quite deferentially to desire Miss Branscombe to come to him for a moment if she had the time to spare. It was all the "business" of the actor at the side-scenes, preparing himself for his entrance.

"Ah! my good child! my dear Stella!" he said with a caressing accent and affectionate gesture, as the girl came into the room at his summons, her face pale for her sad thoughts on this, the first terrible week-day commemoration of her mother's death—her slender figure looking almost shrunken in her plain, unornamented black—her whole air one of unutterable sorrow and the evidence of loss.

She went up to him and put her arms round his neck, as she laid her cheek tenderly on his forehead.

"Dear, darling papa!" she said with fervour; but her tears fell over his upturned face as she spoke, and Mr. Branscombe thought to himself—"Her state of mind is perfect! I have already conquered all the difficulties."

"Take a chair, my love, and come and sit near me," he said, pressing her hand in recognition of her caress. "I have much to say to you."

She looked at him with somewhat of a startled look. What could he have to say to her, prefaced in this strangely solemn manner?

"Nothing to which you will not agree," he said reassuringly, answering her startled look.

"No, I am sure of that," returned Stella fondly—more fondly even than usual, her father representing to her now not only himself but also her beloved mother.

Indeed, who would not agree with that adored being, so good and noble and gifted and superior altogether as he was? Certainly not Stella his idolizing daughter brought up in the faith of his perfectness as she had been, and a firm believer in the quasi divinity to which her life had been subordinate and her mother's sacrificed.

"We have been terribly and rudely shaken, my child," began Mr. Branscombe, looking up to the ceiling. "We have sustained a loss to which, my Stella, words can give neither expression nor dimension."

"Indeed, yes," said Stella simply, her tears still falling softly down her face. "Life will never be the same now without poor mamma. We have lost the best part of it."

"I have lost more than the best part of mine," said her father mournfully. "I have lost all that soothed my sorrows and made my many sufferings endurable; and now I have only my little daughter left to me—the Star of my Home, my Stella."

"Dearest papa!" said the girl, looking at him fondly, yet wondering in her own mind what were those sorrows, those sufferings, to which he so darkly alluded. "I cannot supply mamma's place with you," she went on to say, speaking with extreme tenderness; "but you know how much I love you. Do you not?"

"I hope it. I believe it. Were it not so, I should have nothing more for which to live—for you and I, my Stella,

stand now alone in this cold, cruel world. Hand in hand we stand together—we two alone—the desolate widower, the motherless daughter."

"And Cyril with us, papa," said Stella.

"Cyril? Aye, Cyril! But Cyril is not of our blood, my little girl. Cyril has not lost what we have lost," said her father with a certain fine disdain that seemed to mean intensity of love for the poor, dear dead wife and mother rather than any want of faith in, or appreciation of, the boy himself. "Cyril is a Ponsonby, not a Branscombe," he continued. "We two Branscombes stand alone, as I have said; and we must comfort one another."

"Yes, papa, indeed I will do all I can to comfort you," said Stella, taking his tone and wide of his meaning.

"I knew that! I knew that, my good child," he answered, as one allowing himself to be soothed by loving assurance. "The spirit of your sainted mother lives in you. I knew that I could count on my child."

"So you can on Cyril, quite as much as on me," said Stella, faithful to her two vital affections, and still blind as to her father's real meaning.

"Cyril is eliminated from our great affliction, my dear," was his grave reply. "We must do without Cyril in our mutual sorrowful consolations."

"We cannot do without Cyril, papa," said Stella.

Her father might as well have said that she and Cyril were to do without him.

"I think we shall have to learn that difficult lesson," was his reply, made quite quietly—without any accent of sarcasm, any show of aggressiveness—as if he were saying the most ordinary thing in the world and not what to Stella sounded the most extraordinary, the most impossible. "I think we shall have to do without Cyril, both you and I," he repeated with elegant persistence.

"How can we?" said Stella wonderingly. "He belongs to us now. He is one of us."

"Not quite one of us just yet," her father answered dryly. "Unless, indeed, you have been married, my dear, unknown to me."

"Papa, what a dreadful thing to say!" interrupted Stella, profoundly shocked.

"As such an hypothesis is inadmissible," he continued quietly; "you cannot prove in any way that Cyril is one of

us, or that he belongs to us. A mere fiancé is not one of the family *in esse*, he is only a potential member, a circumstance *in posse*, and can still be relegated to that open space which lies beyond the house door. Is it not so?"

"I do not quite understand what you mean, darling," said Stella softly.

"No? Yet I think I speak plainly, my love. Have you never heard of an engagement between two young people being broken off, my innocent little girl? Are all betrothals necessarily consolidated by a marriage?"

"Papa, what do you mean?" cried Stella, looking at him with as much wonder as dismay. "You cannot mean that I am to give up Cyril?—that I am not to marry him? Oh, dear, dear, papa!—good, noble-hearted, beloved papa, say that I am mistaken, and that you do not mean this! I cannot believe it! Say that I am mistaken!"

She rose from her chair, her face wild with terror, her hands clasped nervously before her, her usually melodious voice now sharpened by fear and flung up into almost a scream of pain.

Mr. Branscombe shuddered and covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, my head! my head!" he cried in a voice of suffering. "My child, how can you be so cruel as to ask me to bear all the torture of this loud excitement, this undisciplined passion? My nerves cannot endure it! Is it not enough that I have lost the tenderest wife that ever breathed—the most beloved partner of my bosom, and cherished companion in my studies and pursuits,—but must you, my daughter, turn the knife in my wound and agonize me afresh by this terrible display of uncontrolled excitement! I, who love all that is gentle and low-voiced and subdued in a woman, to have a daughter who raves like a maniac—and she the daughter of the gentlest soul that ever breathed, the most precious saint that ever lived on earth in human form! Monstrous, oh monstrous! most monstrous and unnatural!" he said in the voice in which he was wont to recite his metrical version of Shakespere's King Lear.

"Forgive me, dear papa," said Stella, down at his feet; "I did not mean to hurt you. You know that I would not give you a moment's pain if I could help it. I did not mean to be passionate or wild, but Cyril—my own Cyril—I cannot give up Cyril! How wicked I am to pain you, darling papa—

but my poor Cyril! Oh, beloved papa, what can I do for you—and my own Cyril too!"

It was pitiable to see the way in which the poor loyal heart was torn and racked between these two great loves—how the faithful soul was tossed between these two great central fears, that of paining her father by disobedience, and that of breaking Cyril's heart by giving him up as her lover. Turn which way she would she saw only anguish and dismay and disloyalty to one or the other of the two who were as dear to her as life itself. And it had come on her so suddenly! It had been the thunderbolt out of a clear sky, falling without warning cloud or dim foretelling gloom. Her mother's awful death itself had not been more appalling, more unexpected, than this strange announcement of her father's that she must give up her lover. Not half an hour ago and she felt that her love at least was as safe and solid as the very earth itself; and now had come the earthquake and ruin and desolation everywhere!

"Then you do not love me, Stella? Ah, well, I must inure myself to woe!"

Mr. Branscombe sighed deeply, leaning his glossy well-brushed head with pensive grace on his white and scented hand.

"Yes, papa, I do! I do! You know that I do!" she answered, kneeling down by him as she used to kneel by her mother. "But I love Cyril too. Why may I not keep you both?"

"Impossible, Stella! Impossible, my child! No man can serve two masters, and you must make your choice between us. You cannot have both father and lover—at least not now and in their entirety."

He spoke in a slow, deep measured voice—still the voice in which he was wont to repeat his poetry and which to Stella expressed the ideal of pathos, truth and earnestness.

"Say exactly what you mean and wish, papa," she cried, the look of pain on her face deepening into one of absolute terror. It was almost as if this beloved father, representative of all human nobleness as he was, had suddenly become transformed and had taken on himself something strange and dreadful—as if the guardian angel in whose care she had trusted—the god whose grace she had prayed to win and thought to have found—had turned from her with an angry

countenance, and had become her cruel enemy and her implacable judge.

"I mean, my dear, that you must postpone your marriage with this young man; at least for the immediate present," said Mr. Branscombe, softening his voice but thinking it as well to go straight to the point and spare further agonies of doubt.

"Not marry him in August!" asked Stella. "Cyril will wait," she added. "There is no need to marry till he has received his appointment and just before he sails. I am sure he will wait," she said, speaking as if a load had been taken from her, and as she spoke, laying her hand in her father's with a fond, almost protecting gesture.

"And you would break my heart in September say, if you refrain from doing so in August?" he answered reproachfully. "You would leave me, Stella, in my terrible loneliness while you made your own happiness with another?—and leave me with such unnecessary haste," he added in a low voice. "I shall soon die!" he sighed, laying his hand on his heart. "My days are numbered. Would you advance by so much the fatal hour?—you, my daughter, my Stella!"

"Papa! you are not ill, are you? I did not know that you were ill" cried Stella, kissing his hands as this new fear overwhelmed her with fresh agony.

"Cyril is young," continued Mr. Branscombe, not heeding the interruption or the caresses, and only careful to work the profitable vein on which he had struck. "You will not have long to wait. My days, my Stella, will not be many, for my heart is broken and my health destroyed for ever. I ask you only to stay with me—your only parent now!—for a few months, or even weeks it may be, remaining to me;—not to leave me to be attended by hirelings in my last hours;—to stay with me, my child, and close my eyes when I shall depart to her whom we both love and who has already gone. I should like to have your sweet face about my dying pillow—the last thing on which my failing sight should rest! I should like to go straight from my own dear child on earth to the sainted spirit of her mother in heaven—from my earthly Stella to my soul's best purified star!"

He said all this with mournful eyes delicately wet and again raised devoutly to the ceiling of the room. His air of poetic resignation and elegant despair would have been transparent enough to all but a child who had been born and

brought up in the faith of filial worship and the belief in paternal perfection. But it told with Stella as he meant it to tell. Her critical faculty had never dared to plumb nor measure her father's sincerity.

"Papa! papa! do not talk like this!" she cried, weeping passionately. "It breaks my heart to hear you."

"Mine is broken already," said Mr. Branscombe with that pathetic patience, that quiet resignation to despair and pensive allusion to unknown burdens which touches the sympathies of the young more deeply that anything in the world beside.

"No, no, papa! You have years of life and beautiful work before you. Years, years," she said, clinging to him.

"Oh, my sweet, fond, trustful child, how youth and love deceive themselves!" he answered, stroking her hair with tender love—the melancholy caress of illimitable sorrow. "A very few months will see the light of this world quenched for me and my eyes opened to the glories above. See! I ask so little from you, my Stella!" he went on to say in a pleading voice that was to his daughter as if a king had knelt at the feet of a beggar. "For what do I sue? Only that you should hold my hand during that fateful passage of my soul—only that you should sit by my bedside while I pass away—receive my last sigh, and close my eyes when I am gone! Is this so much to demand from out the rich treasure of a daughter's love?—so much to take from a long life of happiness as a tribute to a father's worth? In a very short time I shall be in the grave and you will be free to marry your young husband. I shall be out of your path and you will have no obstruction to your wishes. It will not last long, my Stella—not long! not long! The year of your mourning for your beloved mother will not have passed before I, your father, am laid by her side. And during that year of mourning would you invest yourself in all your bridal array and forget her who gave you life in the mad pleasure of the world, the giddy round of bridal festivities? I cannot think so meanly of my Stella—of her mother's child!"

"Papa! all that you say seems so sad, and so beautiful while you speak—but Cyril! poor poor Cyril!" said Stella, weeping afresh.

"Choose then as your heart dictates," said Mr. Branscombe very tenderly and in the manner of one who suddenly abandons all argument, all persuasion. "I would put no force on

you. If I do not win the little sacrifice I have demanded from the plenitude of your love and with the approbation of your conscience, I do not want it from any other motive. Marry then, my Stella, and be happy. I will do my best without you—do my best to find my comfort in the knowledge of your young joy, and to bear with the dignity of a man and the resignation of a Christian the disappointment of my hopes, the wreck of my love and the few days of sorrow still left to me. But, oh God!" he cried with a burst of anguish; "that it should have come to this! that my child, my own beloved and idolized child—my Star, my little Stella—should desert me for a stranger and make her happiness out of my despair!"

He turned away, then suddenly crossed his arms on the table, laid his head on them as if bowed down with anguish, and burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Papa! darling dearest beloved papa—do not cry! do not be so unhappy!" said Stella, trying to force his face from his arms; but the paternal spine was strong and she could not stir it. "Papa, you are breaking my heart!" she continued. "Look up, dearest papa! do look at me! Oh, I cannot bear this!" she said as his tears and convulsive sobs grew heavier and more agonized. "I would rather die than see you like this. Papa! dear papa, I will not leave you! Look up, and do not break my heart in this dreadful way! I cannot bear it! Papa, hear me—I will not marry to leave you alone!"

The die was cast; her promise registered; her father had won the game.

"God bless you, my beloved child!" he sobbed, as he lifted up his face and took the girl to his heart. "Now I know my daughter once more—the Star of my Home—my one sole treasure left!"

"Only be happy, darling papa, and I shall not mind for anything," cried Stella, strung for the moment by the exaltation of her martyrdom to the poetry and nobleness of sacrifice. Then the smoke of the incense cleared and the flame died down as she remembered all that this martyrdom included. "My poor Cyril! I have broken your heart!" she sobbed.

Crushed down by her pain she sank at her father's well-shod, dainty feet, as a devotee might have sunk before the altar of Moloch when the decree of passing one beloved through the fire had gone forth.

"My love," said her father, raising her and kissing her forehead with paternal solemnity; "you have been Cyril's

good angel in that you have given him an opportunity for the exercise of spiritual grace, for which he ought to bless and thank you on his knees. It is not every day that such grand moments come into our lives. Our best benefactor is he who allows us occasion for the cultivation of our highest nature and our noblest self."

And Stella, in her innocence, did not turn the mirror round, nor ask herself why, if it were such a boon that Cyril should have this occasion of spiritual grace through the gift of sorrow—this opportunity of virtue and the cultivation of his highest self by the way of sacrifice—it had not been as valuable for her father? Surely—if she had dared to reflect and been able to see—it would have been more in accordance with his professed system of self-culture, had he appropriated to himself this opportunity of ethical improvement instead of giving it to another who would not value it. A young fellow like Cyril, content to live on that unidealized moral plane where to speak the truth and have no fear of man, to be brave and loyal, cheerful and generous, sincere in soul and pure in heart, considerate of others and self-respectful for himself, made about the sum of his private decalogue, was not likely to be grateful for this kind of supersensual martyrdom, nor indeed very likely to profit by it. Many a man's morality has been wrecked before now by such a trial as this; and Cyril had yet to prove the quality of his, and show by experience whether it would bear the strain put on it by Mr. Branscombe, or break down under it with hopeless ruin and collapse.

But the poor girl thought none of these things. She was not near the region of clear-sighted understanding where her father was concerned. And by her blindness her pain was lessened by at least one pang in that she did not suspect the hollowness of all these high sounding principles for which she suffered—in that she had not dared to imagine that her god was only a mountebank playing a part on a gilded stage—or that the dazzling veil of her prophet hid deformity not superhuman radiance and beauty. Her father was still to her the Supreme; and in obeying him she was emphatically obeying the higher law and doing her noblest duty.

All the same her heart was sore for her young lover and for herself, and the anguish of her martyrdom was hard to bear.

CHAPTER X.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

NATURALLY it was more difficult to convince Cyril than it had been to persuade Stella, that this renunciation of the lover in favour of the father was righteous, just and holy. And the young fellow had to run the gauntlet of many well-delivered blows because he could not see, and would not acknowledge, that father's superior claims. He had to submit to the accusations of selfishness and egoism—according to the invariable rule of the selfish and egoistic—of inability to rise to the sublime height of Duty, that stern Voice of God which we ought all to obey like little children at the mother's knee —of moral coarseness—and finally of greed; Stella's portion, coming to her through her mother, being of manifest importance to a man whose sole actual inheritance that he could touch and handle was just one hundred and fifty pounds a year.

And when Mr. Branscombe blew this poisoned little needle from between his fine, thin, mobile lips he did more execution with it than with any other he had used; as indeed he had foreseen; and by making Cyril furiously angry he put him in the wrong, and forced him to apologize.

On his part Mr. Branscombe was as cool as an ice-cave in a glacier. All these hard things were said with the quietest and most gentlemanlike air of philosophic impartiality possible to be imagined. Not a trace of passion on his side reduced the question to one of individual antagonism or lowered the lofty standard of abstract morality by which he measured the right and wrong of the proposition. His accusations were all based on fact not feeling, and were capable of mathematical demonstration; and when he said things which were as hard as iron and as sharp as steel, his voice was so calm, his intonation so melodious, his manner so refined, that Cyril was often more bewildered than indignant.

More than once he asked himself with boyish doubt of his own heart, had Mr. Branscombe really the nobler insight, and was he himself just a headstrong youth, governed solely by selfish passion and incapable of a higher morality? Yet he could not quite come to this view of himself, try as hard as he would to be honest and candid, and for all that he was to some degree infected by the family cult paid to the family Apollo.

He could not quite confess that he was so much of a low-minded ruffian as Mr. Branscombe made out—always by logical deduction from general principles, and when the sense of a wordy periphrase had to be crystallized into an adjective and a noun—because he wanted to marry Stella, according to their engagement, even though this marriage should take her from her father. It was the law of life, he argued. Birds leave their nests and sons their mothers; daughters make new homes for themselves with other sons taken from other mothers; and so the thing goes on all the world over. What then was there specially shameful and ignoble in this very natural desire of his to make Stella his wife according to her promise? Grant that it did include her elegant father's domestic loneliness—that it necessitated a housekeeper and perhaps an amanuensis—some one must suffer; and Cyril, strong in youth and love and all the hope of his great joy, did not see why that some one should be himself. No, doing his best to be candid, he could not see it—though certainly not for want of Mr. Branscombe's strenuous and unabashed efforts to enlighten him.

Meanwhile between the two poor Stella was morally in the position of those savage brides who, carried off with violence by their husbands and defended with brutality by their kinsmen, run great risk of being torn to pieces between those who try to take and those who will not let go. It was a terrible position for her in truth!—and her heart was nearly broken in her endeavour to reconcile these two irreconcilable affections, to obey these two opposing duties.

When Cyril, with all a young lover's passionate despair, besought her to keep her engagement and marry him as she had promised; when he urged on her his love, his sorrow, his ruined life, the sacredness of her vows, the destruction of his whole future if she fell away from him, and clinched all by appeals to her dead mother's memory and reminders of how she had always countenanced and upheld this love—the poor girl felt that this was indeed her duty, this her truest religion, and that nothing ought to stand between her and his rescue from destruction. When her father in his measured, mournful voice spoke in poetic language of *his* broken heart, *his* speedy death of which he was sorrowfully certain; and yet why should it be sorrowful?—would it not be his release, and her recovery of freedom?—when he reminded her that the sacrifice which he asked of her was only for so short a time; when he compressed the whole thing into an antithesis—so

little to lose and so much to give; when he, too, spoke of her mother up there in heaven, she whose whole life had been one of love and duty and devotion to him, and whose example should be her guide—then her heart turned to him, to this poor papa who was so good, so beautiful, so superior, such a genius; and she felt that Cyril must be patient and consent to wait cheerfully, as she had promised. It was only right and just. They were young and poor papa was not. They owed more to him than to each other; and they could be true and faithful and loving even though they were not to be married just yet. It was their duty. Sacrifice is nobler than self-seeking. They must forego their happiness now that they might take it with a clearer conscience when the time for it should come naturally and without wrong-doing.

Slowly the oscillating balance of her mind inclined more and more this way. Her promise, always insisted on by her father, had already been given as we know. Gradually it became clear as daylight to her that this was the right thing to do—the thing which the higher law commanded and which her mother would have approved. She forgot that mother's anxiety that the marriage should take place even before the day originally fixed on. She had not understood the true significance of her desire then, and she saw it no more clearly now. She only remembered the one great lesson of her life, and by this she sought to shape her own. And as she grew more convinced of the righteousness of her renunciation she found that strength which comes from distinctness of belief, and was able to stand with less turmoil of soul by her desolating decision.

It made no difference to her when Augusta Latrobe, at Cyril's prayer, came to Rose Hill to urge his claims and advise her to marry despite her father's words and her own promise. Poor Cyril! it was once more, as so often before, the straw caught at by the drowning man. He remembered Mrs. Latrobe's kind manner and odd advice in the conservatory, before the awful catastrophe of Mrs. Branscombe's death had thrown all into such dire confusion, and he went to The Laurels as almost the last chance left him. Fortunately for him, he met her just as she was leaving the house with her boy, for their afternoon's walk. For Mrs. Morshead, though rich, would not allow her daughter to have either a maid for herself or a nurse for the boy. Mothers who had children should look after them themselves, she used to say

sourly; and women who chose to go and marry men without sixpence could not expect maids and things when they came back as paupers with families to their old homes.

By meeting her thus alone, Cyril was able to open his heart and ask the fair widow's assistance in the forlorn hope he was leading against Mr. Branscombe, without let or hindrance or spiteful remark from the terrible old woman who was thus kept happily out of the matter.

"I knew it," said Augusta. "I was sure that this would come. I told you as much in the conservatory that day when I advised you to marry—at least this was what I meant. Do you remember?"

"Yes; but I did not understand then what you did mean; and Stella would not have consented to marry me secretly, even if I had asked her," said Cyril.

"No; I know that she would not; for I said much the same to her as I did to you. She saw no rocks ahead, poor dear! and was half inclined to quarrel with me for my wickedness—only that she is too good to quarrel with any one. I am sorry for you both, Mr. Ponsonby—for you, because the happiness of your youth is destroyed, and for her, because she is sacrificing both you and herself to such a mere bit of humbug as Mr. Branscombe. It is the true given for the untrue."

"Oh!" said Cyril, still under the influence of that family worship.

"Surely you do not mean to say that you believe in Mr. Branscombe?" said Augusta, suddenly stopping and facing the young fellow, her clear grey eyes looking into his with as much amusement as surprise. "The most transparent old humbug in the place!—the merest fop and twaddler flattered into thinking himself a genius! Why, Mr. Ponsonby, you surely do not believe in him?" she said again.

"Up to now I have," he answered.

"And now he shows himself in his true colours as utterly selfish and unfeeling," said Augusta. "But he has done nothing which I, who know him, should not have expected of him."

"He is certainly acting selfishly and cruelly just now," said Cyril. "It is all a puzzle to me."

"To me none, for he is doing only as he has done all his life," answered the widow. Then she added in a voice of inquiry: "I have often wondered what darling Mrs. Brans-

combe did really think! She was a woman of far too much good sense to be taken in by him I am sure; but how beautifully she behaved! She was never heard to say a word nor seen to look as if she saw through him, as she must have done. I used to think there are more martyrs in life than have gone to the stake when she showed his hideous daubs and played his atrocious music as sweetly as if it had all been true art instead of the awful stuff it is. What an angel she was!—but what a thousand pities that she ever married that wretched creature! He was no more worthy of her than if he had been a Cherokee Indian; and not so much; for a Cherokee Indian would have been at least a man, and Mr. Branscombe is not."

And by the time that Augusta had delivered herself of this last astounding philippic, which made Cyril hot all over, they had come to Rose Hill and her mission of wise counsel began.

She could do nothing. Stella wept as a loving girl naturally would when discussing such a tremendous matter as this sacrifice was to her; but she said that she had thought it all out and had come to this decision as the best if not the happiest thing to do. She had prayed for guidance and she had received the assurance of this direction. It was a terrible trial for them all; but it was right; and her conscience upheld her in her sorrow.

"My dear, nothing in the world is so fallacious as conscience," said that graceless widow whose rule of right was common sense. "Reason the thing out fairly and you will find that common sense is dead against you. Sentiment—and false sentiment too—is all that you have on your side. You have let your mind get heated and excited so that you do not see things as they are. Believe me, you are acting foolishly and wrongly. Remember, you owe something to Cyril as well as to your father; and you made your first promise to him."

"But it is better for Cyril to suffer than to do wrong," said Stella. "He is unhappy now, poor darling, but I am sure that in his heart he feels I am right. He knows that I do not love him less because I feel it to be my duty to keep with poor papa for a few months or years—while he wants me and cannot do without me."

"You will repent it," said Augusta. "And I tell you again that you are acting not only foolishly but wrongly—as all enthusiasts always do."

"My conscience tells me I am right," said Stella with mournful constancy; and the widow, who was sacrificing her own life's happiness to her idea of duty, knew that it was useless to say more.

It was not by nor for herself that Stella had judged. It was the voice of that Divine guidance which she had prayed for that spoke in her; and she would be doubly criminal were she to be false to its teaching. She loved Cyril better than her life; but not better than God; and love was less than the Divine Will. And by the decree of this Divine Will she owed her first duty to her father. If he forbade the marriage to take place yet awhile, and wanted her to live with him for another year or so, she must obey him. She would be sinful else.

One other person agreed with her; and only one. This was Hortensia Lyon—next to Augusta her greatest friend; perhaps now, when Augusta had gone over so boldly to Mammon and self-seeking, she ought to call her quite her greatest and dearest and nearest! Hortensia—a pretty, large-eyed, delicately-featured little creature with a Puritan air and a Quaker-like head, slender as a willow-wand, dreamy, unpractical and interpenetrated with moral heroism and the spirit of self-sacrifice—Hortensia upheld her, and said that she was doing grandly, nobly, virtuously. And when we are inclined to one way more than to another, a child's applause will uphold us where the condemnation of a sage will scarcely shake.

Stella was greatly cheered by what Hortensia said. The two together carried the day against Augusta's tinkling cymbal of worldly wisdom; and finally the question was settled. Duty triumphed over love; the way of sacrifice was entered on rather than that of happiness; her father's need was more powerful than her lover's loss; and the desolation of the former was more pitiful than the despair of the latter. Stella turned her face from the pleasant garden where life was to have been one long summer's day of love and joy, and accepted the stony path of virtue and renunciation. The scale of duty settled down firmly and the balance no longer oscillated. She said, "No, we must wait," for the last time; and then the curtain fell on Cyril's departure from Highwood, still engaged but with his marriage indefinitely postponed. At any rate it was postponed until the not far-distant time when Mr. Branscombe should die of his broken heart

and secret malady; as he faithfully promised that he would.

So now there were three broken hearts instead of one. And of these three, Stella was upheld by the consciousness of well doing—Mr. Branscombe had the tremendous strength given by that kind of egoism which justifies itself through belief in its own superiority to all the surrounding world—while Cyril, who had neither the consciousness of well doing nor the strength of egoism to support him, was the victim of both and undeniably the one most to be pitied of the three.

But he neither cut his throat nor had brain-fever, as perhaps he should had he been the ideal lover of woman's favourite fancy. He went back to London quietly and like a gentleman; not taking the world into his confidence by any eccentric demonstrations of grief on the platform, yet, all the same, feeling more desolate, more shipwrecked than he once believed he ever could have felt, come what might into his life.

Meanwhile, Stella, listening to her father's poetry and playing over his music at Rose Hill, furtively wiped away the tears that would fall, try as she might to strangle them in her throat before they mounted to her eyes. As Cyril did not see those tears he could scarcely give her credit for them; and more than once he surprised in himself a certain strain of bitterness when he thought of her choice, and how she had thrown him over for the father whose immense superiority he was beginning to question. But whenever he came face to face with that strain he checked it as if it had been a mortal sin. Whatever else he lost he would not lose his faith in her, he used to say to himself; "the noblest girl in the world," as Hortensia Lyon had called her when finally the coup de grâce had been given to love and all love's sweet fond weakness, and the cross of duty, self-sacrifice and daily martyrdom had been preferred instead. Yes; she was the noblest-minded girl in the world and the dearest, thought poor Cyril with faithful constancy and loving reverence; and whatever happened he would keep this faith as a precious and inalienable amulet.

Alike in the loftiness of their principles, especially so far as these affected Cyril, nothing could be more unlike in character than these two friends, Stella Branscombe and Hortensia Lyon. Stella was as we have seen, pre-eminently a good girl, conscientious, honourable, dutiful, unselfish; but she was also pre-eminently natural and human. She liked

fun as well as the Miss Pennefathers, say, though her fun was somewhat different from theirs; she had a merry smile and a merry laugh when she did smile and laugh—which she had not done of late; she was by no means indifferent to dress, but thought the choice of a colour, the cut of a sleeve, matters demanding careful consideration; she honoured principles, but she was sweetly weak to persons; in a word she was feminine and concrete, where Hortensia was spiritual and abstract—or rather, it should be said, where Hortensia tried to make herself believe that she was spiritual and abstract.

Hortensia was one of whom those who loved her said she was too good for this world, and those who did not said she gave herself airs, and thought herself better than anybody else. Mr. Branscombe once wrote an Ode in her honour, wherein he compared her to a lily, a daisy, a dove and a fawn; and Mrs. Morshead used to call her "that affected little jade," and express her longing to improve her manners and ways by giving her a good shaking. She was not always quite the same person, having already had various ideals in her mind to which she morally dressed. At present her pose was that of Evangeline and other Puritan maidens of whom the ideal went to the extreme of self-suppression; a standard of life so lofty as to be practically unattainable; passionless purity; maidenly reserve; womanly and ennobling influences. She was just at the age when girls put out their sensibilities like feelers, trying for their proper pabulum, their appointed path. She talked a great deal of every woman having her assigned mission; and her soul's pain at this moment was, that she had not found hers. She sometimes said that she would make herself a hospital-nurse, and sometimes that she would go to Girton and take honours in classics and mathematics. Sometimes she was all for taking up a neglected district in London, which she would cleanse and purify and make into a little oasis of virtue and modesty by the simple force of her presence, the power of her exhortations. Then she thought she would write a book—only she did not quite know on what subject, nor how to begin, nor was she always sure of her spelling, while her syntax was decidedly shaky. At another time she talked of going into a school where she should teach girls younger than herself such problems of life and morals as she herself had mastered. Preaching to navvies was a prospect that at one time allured her; keeping a night-school for

ploughboys was another; going out to India on the Zenana Mission was one dream of her idle hours; studying medicine was another. It was the seething time of her mental life and she was always in a state of unrest; but she was sincere if rather silly; and she had not yet tried falling in love. Indeed, she proclaimed herself one of nature's vestals, inasmuch as she thought love a very dreadful matter, and girls who liked men very reprehensible and extraordinary. She could not understand how any nice girl could possibly like one man better than all women; and even her old bosom-friend, Stella Branscombe, had dropped down many degrees when first her engagement to Cyril Ponsonby had been made known. By her renunciation she had risen even higher than she stood before; and Hortensia welcomed her back to continued celibacy as a kind of strayed lamb restored to the fold of maidenly right-mindedness. For all this she was not consciously affected; she was only seeking and dissatisfied.

Her present attitude was, as has been said, that of intense quietness of life and moral self-restraint; and her main mission was to influence her cousin Randolph Mackenzie to take orders. "Woman's rightful work was just this kind of thing," she said. It was influence, not authority; passivity, not action; and to make a splendid fellow of six-feet two content himself with a country curacy, where he would have perhaps three hundred bucolic souls of all ages to look after, was the latest object of her ambition.

It was through this cousin, Randolph Mackenzie, that Cyril Ponsonby had known Highwood and Stella Branscombe. The two young men, the Orestes and Pylades of their set, were fast friends and sworn chums. They had come down to this pretty place on the outskirts of the mountain district for the Long of one year and the Short of another, by which all the mischief had been done and the present sorrow brought about. For if Randolph Mackenzie had not thought his cousin Hortensia an interesting little thing, with all her odd fancies and demureness, he would not have spent his vacations at Highwood and then Cyril would not have known Stella Branscombe; he would not have fallen in love with her, nor would she with him; he would not have gained her parents' consent to a marriage which had more prospective solidity than present brilliancy; he would not have been thrown overboard by Mr. Branscombe when that good Matilda died and the poet and artist wanted to keep Stella to himself; and he would not

therefore have been knocking about London at this moment with the sad patience of a man whose life has lost its meaning but to whom no violence nor raving can bring relief; he would not have thought his youth, his strength, his manhood, his health, his ambition of no present avail, and only of future blessing when fate should have comfortably disposed of Mr. Frederick Branscombe and have thus made Stella free.

Meanwhile Hortensia bade her friend be of good cheer. She had done what was right, and the right knows no recoil of sorrow—she had sacrificed herself for her father; and what could she have done better than this?

"She could have married in spite of her father, and that would have been better," said Augusta Latrobe, when Hortensia pronounced her lofty theorem. "She owed it to herself and Cyril Ponsonby; and in my opinion she has been very silly, very weak and absurdly sentimental."

"Oh, Mrs. Latrobe! I wonder how you can say such things!" said Hortensia with not very flattering surprise. "I think she has been sublime!"

"Very likely you do," answered Augusta coolly. "That does not prove her wise because you are foolish. You are just a couple of sentimental school-girls together; and one makes the other more ridiculous than she need be. Self-sacrifice is all very well up to a certain point, but beyond that it is wrong. And Stella's was beyond that point."

"For her father!" repeated Hortensia.

"For a selfish old fop!" said Augusta. "Father or not, he is nothing but that—a very selfish, vain old man!"

"Oh!" said Hortensia again.

Since that Ode written in her honour she too had accepted the family myth and joined in the family worship. "How can you speak of such a man as Mr. Branscombe in this way? He is a genius—a real divinely-inspired genius."

"He has had wit enough to persuade you and others that he is," said Augusta; "which is the cleverest thing about him that I know. As for real talent he has no more than that dragon-fly—and not so much—for the dragon-fly knows what he can do and what he cannot, and what he does he does well; which you cannot say of Mr. Branscombe. If you must have a hero, Hortensia, take a real one and not such a sham as this!"

But Hortensia's pretty Puritanical little face gave no sign of yielding to what, after all, was less argument than assertion.

On the contrary, a faint, self-satisfied smile stole over it, as she said to herself: "Augusta is jealous of me and Mr. Branscombe. I remember, now, how vexed she was when he wrote that lovely Ode to me, and she does not like him because he does not like her. He called her the other day a chrysalis not yet expanded; but he said that I was a Psyche and had gained my wings. I know him better than she does; and I know how beautiful his nature is and what a splendid intellect he has; and nothing that she can say will change my opinion." Aloud she said firmly: "Stella has done quite right to give up her marriage that she might stay with her father. Such a father is not an every-day possession."

And with this she sighed and wished that her father had been as refined and lovely as Mr. Branscombe. But for her sins he was only an unæsthetic kind of Philistine, who laughed at the vagaries of his little maid, as he called her; gave her free leave to talk according to her mood, but took care that she did nothing compromising or overt; chaffed her when she was at her sublimest, and sometimes, but rarely, reasoned with her gravely when she had gone farther than usual over the borders of good sense and right reason—a good-tempered, domestic, utterly unromantic being, who liked his cigars and took kindly to his claret and who thought the world would be the best place imaginable but for those uncomfortable enthusiasts who are bent on making it better.

"If only people would let things alone!" he used to say, holding his glass between him and the light; "if only his little maid would be content with her lot as Providence had marked it out for her, and not bother herself about things which were no concerns of hers and for which nature had not fitted her! She had everything in life to make her happy, and what the dickens was it to her what others had or had not, were or were not! We were sent here to do our duty like rational beings—not to go tramping over the world tilting at windmills like so many Don Quixotes; and we were meant to enjoy ourselves—not to live always in the blues and as if we were going to our execution! So he would his little maid should go and sing 'I'm afloat!' and leave all these doleful dumps for the maniacs who liked them!"

By which it may be seen what an unæsthetic and semi-reprobate Mr. Lyon was; and why Hortensia sighed when she contrasted Stella's elegant father with her own.

CHAPTER XI.

HIS FAITHFUL CHUM.

It was a fine rich luscious day when everything tempted even the most indolent or the most industrious to leave the four narrow walls of home for the fresh air and freedom of nature. But at four o'clock Mr. Branscombe was still in his studio, as he had been all the morning. And Stella was with him, as she also had been all the morning—indeed as she always was in these sad later days! She had glided into her mother's place about her father as naturally as she had inherited her jewels, or taken over the housekeeping, and was now as firmly established in it as if there had never been what Mr. Branscombe used to call a solution of continuity at all. She was his audience and his torchbearer, his secretary and amanuensis, just as that good Matilda had been; and she did almost as well. She copied out his poetry and made his manuscript music intelligible; she learnt his songs and played his symphonies; she accepted his own interpretation of his mixed metaphors and confused phrases, and believed him when he said that this thought was grand and that idea fine; she believed in him, ministered to him, thought that she understood him and was very sure that she loved him. And because she believed in him and loved him she flattered him to the top of his bent, under the idea that she was simply paying him proper respect and offering him the homage so entirely his due.

And she used to tell herself twenty times a day that her life was blessed and her labours gracious privileges, and that to be of use to her beloved and gifted father was the noblest destiny she could fulfil. Nevertheless, her young heart was often weary; do what she would the tears would rise from her choking throat to her eyes; she was getting very pale and thin and careworn altogether; and something of her mother's look of patient and concealed pain was creeping into her face, like the grey shadows among the roses.

Mr. Branscombe's artistic activity had not been interrupted by his wife's death. When the details of the funeral had been arranged, a becoming studio dress of dark grey velvet, with a crape band round the arm, devised, and the Monument thought out, as he said, then he went back to his

art, which was like nothing so much as the unconscious cerebration of somnambulism. To be sure his Epic was laid aside. It would be a mutilated monument to her memory, he said; all the more impressive in its unfinished state than if he had perfected it to the end. In the incompleteness of this grand work would be seen the depth and tragic intensity of his love and its great loss; and he would found his claim to immortality more on this colossal fragment than on any of his finished pieces. The grandest works of art are Greek torsos and Michael Angelo's unfinished statues, he said. His Epic should rank with them; and he was not ashamed of the parallel.

For the rest he spent his time in writing "Odes to Memory," "Threnodies," "Sonnets to My Lost Love," "To Matilda in Heaven," and the like; and in composing funeral marches and dirges, which Stella had to learn by heart and play in the twilight. Also he began a picture like to nothing in heaven or earth; but it stood in his imagination as a striking likeness of his good Matilda going up to heaven in a cloud of glory, attended by angels and cherubs' heads. It was a cross between an Assumption and St. Catherine; but he honestly believed it to be original and all his own; and he was perhaps more content with this last effort of his genius than with anything that he had ever done.

If only he had been content to maunder about these queer artistic fields by himself—if only he would have planted and reared and harvested without claiming the companionship and assistance of another, he might have amused himself then as he would, and have been no burden to man or woman. But he would not labour alone—for he called it labour, and believed it to be as he called it. He was like one of those children who cannot play by themselves, but must have some one to sit by and watch them—to be their chorus, or at least their audience. So with Mr. Branscombe;—he must have an artistic henchman; and Stella was consecrated by nature and convenience to that post. As we have seen, she thought that she prized her privileges and was glad of her power to make poor papa's days less sad. But how unhappy her own were! She suffered from such a strange sense of oppression, of tedium, of fatigue, of monotony, of mental starvation too, for which she could in no wise account. She supposed it was all because dear, dear mamma had died and poor darling Cyril had gone away so miserable and unsatisfied. It could

be nothing more; but how beautiful it was out of doors to-day! How much she would like to be in the garden! Papa's studio was always rather close and stifling—the window being generally shut even on a summer's day like this, and the smell of the paint strong. If he would but come out for a little while with her?—It would do him good; and the day was so lovely.

Yet how could she ask him when he had told her that the Ode which she was transcribing must be done by five o'clock, and it was now four and she had not nearly finished? She had been writing ever since ten o'clock this morning, and she had been unpardonably slow. No; she must not look at the sunshine on the grass, at the flowers in the beds, at the blue sky above. She must not imagine the fresh scents nor the singing of the birds; she must finish this bit of work for dear papa, and please him by doing it well. And yet how unsteady her hand was to-day!—and those wretched tears!—They blurred her vision so that she could not see what she was doing; and if they fell on the paper they spoilt everything. But she could not keep them out of her eyes; and when papa called her in his self-absorbed, preoccupied way; "My good Matilda," as he so often did, she felt as if she should die. But she must get on with this Ode, one of the many already composed in honour of her sweet mother's memory, and stifle her yearnings, her sorrow and her weariness as she best could.

Not many people came now to Rose Hill. All the visits of condolence had been paid and things had gone back into their usual groove. Stella and Mr. Branscombe were so constantly denied that the neighbours gave up making useless calls which only annoyed them, knowing as they did that this perpetual invisibility, this constant "not at home," was a fiction, not a fact. And though all knew that the order was general not individual, each took it as a personal affront and resented it accordingly.

One visitor, however, was never shut out; and to whomsoever else father and daughter were denied, for Hortensia Lyon they had always a welcome. She was Mr. Branscombe's prime favourite, and he never thought the time lost that was given to her. When therefore, the servant came in to-day, and said that Miss Lyon was in the drawing-room, Mr. Branscombe, so far from objecting to this interruption, looked back from his easel with a smile, telling Stella that she might leave her

transcription till to-morrow, and that she was to keep her little friend for a few minutes till he should have finished this piece of angelic drapery, when he himself would come to them.

"Hortensia Lyon is not like other girls, vain, shallow, frivolous, ignorant," he said. "She has a heart and a mind, and goes far deeper in thought than many a woman of twice her age. I consider her a rare and precious possession here in our little sanctuary of poetry and art."

"She is a dear girl; and she values you too, papa. She will be so glad to see you. I know she thinks it an honour—as she ought."

Stella spoke warmly and quickly, with a sudden feeling of relief and pleasure, only to be accounted for on the ground of her immense love for Hortensia Lyon. It was as if the gloom which pervaded this hot stifling room like a bodily presence had been suddenly removed; and she felt almost like the Stella of former days as she shut the study-door behind her, and breathed the fresher air of the hall and passages.

When she went into the drawing-room she found not only Hortensia, but Hortensia's cousin as well—that tall, broad, big-limbed Randolph Mackenzie whom the little player at Providence and Puritanism wanted to transform into a meek country curate devoted to lawn-tennis and Mothers' meetings, and whom nature had designed for a pioneer of civilization and the ruler of rough men whose strength he would direct and make subservient to good ends. But natural designation had not much influence over Hortensia, and playing at Providence had.

There had always been a very friendly feeling between Stella and Randolph. As the chum of her beloved—as the beloved of his chum—they met on the common ground of interest and sympathy; and each loved the other because both loved Cyril Ponsonby. At this moment then, when all her love had turned to sorrow, this visit was doubly delightful to the poor girl; and only to Cyril himself would she have shown more joy and welcome than she did to Randolph.

"When did you come?" she asked with a fluttered look.

It was almost as if Cyril himself was standing like a spirit behind that huge broad back.

"Last night. So you see I have not been long before coming to see you," he answered.

"No, indeed, you have not. And it was very kind of you," she said.

With a strange impulse she bent forward and offered him her hand again, her beautiful blue eyes filling with tears as she looked into his face with such a sudden effluence of love on her own, it made him almost start.

"I assure you, Stella, I have had no peace till I brought him here," said Hortensia, with her delicate, half-checked smile—smiling being a frivolity rather below her present standard of moral excellence and not to be indulged in needlessly. "I tell him he is sadly undisciplined, and needs far more self-control than he has," she added, looking at her massive cousin with the slender woman's amiable sense of spiritual superiority over a muscular mountain of human flesh.

She meant to imply that he was lost as he was, but worth the trouble of saving; only, he must let himself be saved by obedience to her.

"I do not pretend to be as good as you, Hortensia," he answered with frank good-nature.

This pretty little girl's quaint scoldings were as pleasant to him as if they had been caresses, and hurt him no more than a little child hurts a Newfoundland dog.

"You ought to try, Randolph!" said Hortensia, lofty and uncompromising. "You should not suffer yourself to be so impetuous as you are—so impatient and undisciplined. We do so much more by meekness and self-control."

"Yes, I know all that," he answered. "But what is a poor rough fellow to do, Hortensia, when he is born so? I cannot make myself as sweet and gentle as you and Miss Branscombe. And I should not be what I am if I were what you are," he added with undeniable logic.

"Not rough, but undisciplined," she repeated. "And want of discipline is to the character what roughness is to the actions. It is all the difference between one man and another."

"A very deep and lovely thought," said Mr. Branscombe, coming into the room. "Just such a thought as I should have expected to hear from the pearl of Highwood—the modern Evangeline!"

"How kind you are, dear Mr. Branscombe!" said Hortensia Lyon, looking as fluttered as Stella had looked. But the one had been the agitation of love, the other the gratification of pleased vanity.

"And what may you have been doing with yourself, Mr. Mackenzie?" asked Mr. Branscombe of Cyril's chosen friend.

He spoke with an indescribable air of half-offensive patronage. To him Cyril and Randolph and the whole tribe of practical, athletic and unæsthetic young men were little better than machines with independent volitions—brutes with the use of speech and a glimmering of reason. For all the finer purposes of human life—for all that was, as he used to say, gracious, supreme, lovely, and of precious delightfulness to man,—these muscular leaders of uncultured men, these huge-limbed pioneers of civilization were nowhere; and he valued them no more than if they had been so many elephants in broadcloth, or rhinoceroses speaking English. They were the blind Cyclopes where he was the elegant and astute Ulysses;—they were the lumbering Titans, and he was the winged Mercury, the divine Apollo, the commanding Jupiter, supreme above them all.

"Not very much, sir," answered Randolph. "I have taken my B.A. degree, and I am waiting to see what will turn up. If Cyril Ponsonby goes to India I should like to go there too. You know he is like my brother, and I feel rather blank without him."

"Orestes and Pylades? Jonathan and David, hey?" returned Mr. Branscombe with a polite sneer. "You have warranty, you see, for your extreme friendship together."

"Yes," said Randolph simply. "But neither Pylades nor David was half as good a fellow as Cyril Ponsonby. He is out and out the finest fellow I ever came across; and I have known a few men in my time."

"He is rather an uncultivated young man," objected Mr. Branscombe, always maintaining his lofty attitude of Jovian supremacy. "He does not understand the subtle harmonies, the finer symphonies of art and life as a really cultured person should. He is a breezy-tempered, good-natured person, I admit; but he is not one of whom I could make a companion. He has not the mental insight of your charming cousin here," turning to Hortensia whose hand he took with paternal familiarity and fondness.

"They are so different, sir, you cannot compare them!" said Randolph, a little put to it to maintain his loyalty to each intact.

Hortensia was of course unrivalled in the world of women

—Stella Branscombe was the only girl who came near her; but Cyril was unrivalled too, and must not be degraded that even Hortensia might be exalted.

"No, you are right, Mr. Randolph; we cannot compare them," said Mr. Branscombe. "A barn-owl and a bird of Paradise—a Suffolk punch and a gazelle-like Arab—no, there is, as you say, no comparison."

"Oh, papa!" said Stella. "Poor Cyril! he is not to be compared either to an owl or a cart-horse!"

If Randolph had been hard put to it to keep his loyalty to his two dear friends intact under the trial ordained by Mr. Branscombe, so was poor Stella. She loved Cyril and she loved her father; she honoured both impartially, and she believed as much in the one as in the other. It was a dreadful thing to her to hear her father, who was as her king and conscience, speak slightingly of her lover, who was her ideal of young manhood. She could not be angry with papa whatever he might do. That would be impiety; and Stella was not impious. But neither could she hear poor darling Cyril spoken of with disdain, nor compared to an ugly barn-owl and a coarse cart-horse without making her protest in defence.

"My dear, you speak with the fond imagination of a romantic and love-sick girl," said Mr. Branscombe calmly. "I, who have my reason undisturbed, and who know men and manners, am better able than you to catalogue that young man. I grant him all the virtues of the natural man—all the uncouth virtues as I may say; but of the finer perceptions which come from culture, he has not a trace; and in asserting that he has you but betray your own lack. Let us pass to another subject. This does not interest nor amuse me."

"How is your great picture getting on, Mr. Branscombe?" asked Hortensia with kindly haste.

She was as distressed as Randolph by this sudden onslaught which both knew cut poor Stella to the heart.

"Come and see," he answered, rising and offering her his arm. "When you have given me the benefit of your fresh young criticism I shall be more satisfied with my work. We shall return immediately, my Stella. Do not give yourself the trouble of following us. I do not think Mr. Randolph Mackenzie will care for what he may find in my poor studio," he added with a disagreeable smile.

"Yes, indeed, sir, I do," said Randolph, heroically fibbing.

But though he rose from his seat, prepared to go with his cousin and her flatterer, Stella did not move. Something stronger than even her desire to please her father held her back. She must have a word alone with Randolph. She must speak of Cyril without restraint or unfriendly witnesses.

"When, where, did you see him last?" she asked hurriedly, so soon as the door was shut. "How was he? How did he look? What did he say? Poor Cyril! Poor darling Cyril! Oh Randolph! I sometimes feel as if I should like to die—as if I could not live and know my poor darling Cyril to be so unhappy—and through me—for all that it was my duty!"

"Don't cry, Miss Stella, please don't," said Cyril's chum affectionately and with genuine distress, not knowing what to do for the best and as much afraid of his own sympathetic impulses as he was sorry for her grief. "He was very down, poor old man, and feels his disappointment terribly," he went on to say frankly, not being good at quick subterfuge. "He sent all sorts of messages to you; said I was to give you his love and that you were never to doubt him, never to forget him, nor think that he would forget you; that you were to believe in him whatever you might hear, for that he would be true and faithful to the last and would wait for your promise to the end of his life. Only you were not to give him up. You were to be firm to him as he would be to you, and hold yourself always engaged though you were separated."

"So I will," said Stella. "Nothing should make me give him up. The engagement is not broken, only postponed; and unless he wants to break it off I will not."

"No; I am sure you will not," said Randolph, warmly. "But tell me, Miss Stella, why has Mr. Branscombe taken such a dislike to him? Did Cyril offend him in any way? I know he would not have done so intentionally, and if he did, it was quite by accident and mistake. I was never more taken aback in my life when he let fly like that!"

"Nor was I," said Stella, turning pale. "I cannot understand him! Papa is so wise and good and just and noble, I cannot make it out. Cyril perhaps vexed him because he would not at the very first consent to postpone our marriage; but papa said nothing so bitter then as he did to-day—at

least not to me. Cyril told me that he had been rather hard on him when they were alone."

"Yes, he told me too, that Mr. Branscombe had been uncommonly rough on him," said Randolph in his more familiar vernacular. "But you do not mind, do you, Miss Stella? and you will not be influenced?"

"No," said Stella firmly; "not even papa could turn me against Cyril."

"That is right! That is just what I expected!" said Cyril's chum with almost passionate warmth. "I think my cousin one of the dearest and best girls in the world, but I think you are even better. I never pitied Cyril so much as now, when I see more clearly than I ever did what he has lost. If I had a saint I would make you that saint, Miss Stella. They gave you the right name—Stella, the 'Star!'"

He said all this with a rush of excitement and passionate enthusiasm which would have drawn on him the rebuke of his self-controlled little cousin, had she heard it. But something seemed to carry him away in spite of himself. He had always admired Stella Branscombe, had always loved her as his sister for Cyril's sake; but he had never known half her goodness, half her beauty, until to-day. And he had never, as he said, pitied Cyril so much as now, nor felt that strange flood of something which was like envy without its bitterness and with only its yearning desire for a like portion to be meted out to himself.

"We will always be kind to him, you and I?" he said, still as strongly moved as before. "If the whole world deserts him we will be faithful, you and I?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, giving him her hand.

He raised it to his lips, moved to strange reverence and poetry of mood.

"Beautiful Stella!" he said in an under voice. "Cyril's Star—and mine!"

CHAPTER XII.

THOSE MISS PENNEFATHERS.

In almost every country society is a family the girls of which go by the name of "those"—"those Miss Browns," or "that Miss Smith"—girls who are credited with all the faults and follies accidental to a misguided youth and more than ordinarily peccant humanity—girls who may be thankful if

they escape without graver scandals sticking like unclean burrs to their names, and who may think themselves fortunate if they find one person in the place who will stand by them heartily and courageously.

Now the two Misses Pennefather were the "those" of Highwood; and it must be confessed that they did something to earn their title. Georgie and Pattie Pennefather, or, as the irreverent were wont to call them, Gip and Pip, were the standing target for all the poisoned arrows of ill-nature stored up in the society hereabouts. And a society whereof old Mrs. Morshead was an eminent and influential member, was pretty certain to have a respectable store of these same poisoned arrows, and to be just as certain to use them freely.

Mrs. Morshead, never weary of "flinging her five fingers in the face" of the human family in general, flung them with special disdain and abhorrence in the faces of "those Miss Pennefathers." They represented to her the whole circle of nineteenth-century iniquity, from tight dresses and high heels to Professional Beauties and the thronged lobbies of the Divorce Court; and it was only paying proper homage to good manners to deny that they had any at all. "Those Miss Pennefathers" carried on their nicely-shaped little backs wallets filled with every fault and impropriety short of glaring vice, that English girls of good family could have, while denied the possession of any pretty little fringe or plume of virtue to soften the ugliness of these sinful packets. They were fast, bold, loud, vulgar, idle and objectionable young hussies all round; and as for their good looks, of which they were so absurdly vain and which silly people made so much fuss about, Mrs. Morshead protested she did not see them; and thought the whole family downright plain, and those two horrid girls the plainest of the lot. They were at the bottom of all the mischief of the place; and if the place did its duty by itself, they would be cut, as they deserved. Their dress was positively improper; and their manners were like those of two barmaids or cigar-girls, rather than of young ladies whose mother was an Honourable. When some one bolder or more generous than the rest, objected to her sweeping condemnations, and pointed out a few forgotten graces—as, that they were very good-natured and never said unkind things of their neighbours; or, very charitable, and did a great many kind deeds to the poor; that they were

really not so wild and extravagant as they seemed to be, but had the art of making a little go a great way, and a big show out of small material—she used to quite lose herself in her wrath, and declare that at her age she ought to know one thing from another, and be allowed to express her opinion without fear of contradiction from her juniors. She knew what she was talking about when she said those Miss Pennefathers were a disgrace to the place; and that if it were not for the father and mother—who however did not deserve so much consideration—she for one would never suffer them inside her house again. But then she had always been too considerate for others, she would go on to say in perfect sincerity and faithfully believing in her own words; and much thanks she had got for it from any one! Certainly she had got none from those Pennefather people, who had not once sent to ask after her when she had lost her favourite Skye, her beloved and precious little Joe. Those Miss Pennefathers, in a word—those laughing, gay, and careless twins—were about the bitterest of the many bitter drops in the cross old woman's jaundiced cup of life, and stood at the highest point in her cruel scale of condemnation.

She did not really love any human being—her daughter and her bonny little grandson not excepted—but even she drew distinctions and disliked some more than others. Between Hortensia Lyon and those Miss Pennefathers; while she ridiculed the former for her puritanical affections, she vilified the latter for their want of all the decencies of life and habits; or between Stella Branscombe and these two hussies, this Gip and Pip whom all the young men called by their names like their sisters, though no one, she used to add with a sneer, ever thought of marrying them—though Stella was really sickening, with her dear papa here and her dear papa there, dear papa's poems and dear papa's paintings, the beautiful oratorio that dear papa has just composed, and the dear little song that dear papa wrote out last night, still, said Mrs. Morshead, her excess of admiration, silly and exaggerated as it was, was not so bad as their want of respect. Mater and the Governor—Mater so awfully jolly in a house and the Governor the dearest old boy in the world—where did they expect to go to when they could say such things as these! It would be impiety to doubt what would be their end.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Morshead, shaking her high-capped old

head viciously; "let me have the management of those Miss Pennefathers for six months! I would Mater them, I can tell you! If I had not taught them propriety by then, I would—I don't know what I would not do!—eat my own fingers—I declare I would! And this is the kind of thing that you approve of, Augusta," she added angrily. "And if I did not keep you in hand, and make you respectful in spite of yourself, you would Mater me, I suppose? Not while I am alive! Not if I had to die for it!"

"You and I are different from the Pennefather girls and their mother," said Augusta quietly. "I do not approve of their manners, as you know; but," she added a little imprudently, "I cannot help seeing that they are very good-hearted, good-tempered things, and always ready to do any one a kindness."

"Charity begins at home," snapped Mrs. Morshead. "I have no opinion of your very kind people who make all the world their bosom friends, and run about with baskets and all that, when they ought to be sitting quietly at home, darning their stockings and looking after the maids. It is only another form of idleness and want of domestic duty; and I would not give sixpence for the kindness and good-heartedness of these two young minxes—these precious friends of yours! Give me something more sterling; something that makes home home! Ah! my pretty boy!" she suddenly added in a caressing tone, as a huge Persian cat slowly raised himself from a purple velvet cushion where he had been sleeping by the side of her chair, and lightly leapt into her lap. "My precious Shah! my beauty! my dear old boy!" she continued, stroking him fondly. "You at least love your mistress and do not tell lies, or do wickedness. If all the world was like you, my pretty! But he must not eat the birds—the pretty little birds! No! no! he must not do that, old dear! And Augusta!" to her daughter, sharply; "if that Tony of yours drags this cat about as he does, I will slap his hands the next time I see him. So mind, I give you warning. I shall have the creature strangled some day, if I don't take care! Do you hear me, Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma, I will tell Tony to be more careful," her daughter answered in her calm, smooth way; while the old woman grumbled out: "Yes, you had better!" and then fell to kissing and caressing her cat once more.

We all have our soft points, and this was Mrs. Mors-

head's:—She loved animals—this love culminating in a species of idolatry for her Persian cat. Animals were to her what friends and lovers are to others; and to them she gave all the love and respect which she denied to her own kind. Men and women were vile; children were simply imps in embryo; society was a mass of iniquity from end to end; human motives were all corrupt; but cats and dogs and cows and horses were heirs of all the virtues and those who ill-treated dumb creatures were infinitely more criminal than those who oppressed and half-murdered their own brethren. But her love for animals was eminently false and unwholesome. It was not the overflow of that large and comprehensive sympathy which, having first done its normal work, finds new channels of benevolence. It was simply a substitute for human kindness and took to itself what was due to man. Thus, she gave nothing to schools. hospitals, or asylums, but she subscribed largely to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, to the Home for Lost Dogs, and she was one of the most generous benefactors, as well as one of the most active propagandists, for the Anti-vivisection Society, which, perhaps, she held as the most important of all. Against the physiologists indeed, she was specially irate, and would rather, she said, have the whole human race decimated by disease than insure the health and well-being of the world by the sacrifice of a rabbit or a guinea-pig. Men had not made such a good thing of life, according to her, that they should be perpetuated by vicarious suffering. Let them perish from off the face of the earth, but let the dear dumb brutes remain untroubled and undisturbed. All the same she eat her beef and mutton, her lamb and veal and chicken with a clear conscience; and when Sandro Kemp once urged this flesh-eating against her theories, as a proof of the universal law of transmutation for the one part, and of the need of human supremacy for the other, she told him he was impious and desired him to change the conversation.

If only she had given her own kind a little of the compassion that she lavished on those dear dumb brutes! But she tyrannized over her daughter; treated her little grandson with fatal harshness; made her service one of pain and fear to her domestics; and took away the fine flavour of repute from two young girls whose only sin was in their heedlessness, their beauty and their youth. This was not cruelty according to her; but to hurt any creature with four legs

was a crime which a Christian legislature should make punishable as a felony.

If Mrs. Morshead disliked "those Miss Pennefathers," the twins shrank with as much antipathy from her. For all their careless and unthinking natures, for all their buoyancy and elasticity of spirit, there was something in the old woman's persistent sourness and opposition which oppressed them as nothing else did. They liked Augusta—indeed no one could fail to like her, even-tempered and reasonable as she was; and they pitied her and little Tony more than they pitied the poorest person in the parish; but old Mrs. Morshead was a horror, and more than they could stand, save under the strongest compulsion of social necessity. When they paid her the visits demanded by duty and politeness, they paid them as seldom and made them as short as they could, while doing their best to avoid pitfalls and stumbling blocks of offence. This was the hardest part of the business. Walking blindfold among burning ploughshares was nothing to it, and skating on thin ice was comparatively safe going. With Mrs. Morshead the burning ploughshares were as thick as pebbles on the seashore and the ice was never more than a mere film which gave way as soon as touched. Hence their visits were both brief and rare; and as Mrs. Morshead in common with all tyrants, liked to be able to bully ad libitum, but to be made as much of as if she were the sweetest creature alive, she resented as a personal insult the slackness of intercourse which was the order between The Laurels and Sherrardine, where the Pennefathers lived.

In truth, she resented everything whatever about the Pennefathers, whether affecting herself or no. All the circumstances of the family made one huge conglomerate of annoyances, one great bête noire against which she waged incessant and ineffectual war. The very name was an offence. Pennefather! What a mouthful it was, and how absurd altogether! Pennefather here and Moneypenny there—one would think that Highwood had been originally peopled by coiners, she said, putting her old prunella-slippered feet on all the rules of philology. And the affectation of their calling their place Sherrardine, because Mrs. Pennefather's father had lived at Sherrards, the family place, for the few years of his Viscountship!—As if any one cared to know that they had a Viscount in the family—tacking themselves on like that to the aristocracy simply because that silly woman was an Honour-

able! They were substantially only simple commoners like any one else, and not so good as some others. For, if report said true, they had enough to do to make both ends meet in their noisy, riotous, untidy household. And if those Miss Pennefathers kept at home a little more than they did, and thought more of their duties and less of their dress, it would be far better for them and every one connected with them. And if they paid their bills more punctually and gave fewer dances and garden-parties, and all that nonsense, it would be more to their credit. And so she, Mrs. Morshead, would tell them some day. If Mr. and Mrs. Pennefather did not know how to guide their own children aright, it was the duty of a Christian matron of her age and experience—the oldest inhabitant of the parish and perhaps if all people had their due the most respectable—it was her duty to give them a little friendly advice and tell them what the world said of them.

She was full of this resolution when the door-bell rang and the servant ushered in the Misses Pennefathers, as he might have ushered in two young lion-cubs fresh from the jungle.

Crisp, curly, jet-black hair, surmounted by audacious white-beaver hats turned up short on one side and flapping low down on the other; four roving, bright and dark-brown eyes set under brows as straight as if they had been ruled by a line and as black as if they had been drawn in ink; two pretty little Roxalana noses; wide, smiling, almost scarlet lips, showing a full set of small square teeth when they laughed—and they were always laughing; cheeks dotted with dimples and as bright as damask roses in the sun; stature just five feet three, exact measurement, not a millimètre more or less in either; trim, well-busked figures, draped in showy garments tied tightly back to the full display of all the gracious curves and generous outlines, the modelling and shaping of art and nature combined; loud voices as clear as silver bells; frank manners knowing no fear and seeking no favour; an atmosphere of unchecked gaiety, of abounding vitality, of girlish devil-may-carishness, of the very insolence of youthful happiness; this was the best description that could be given of the two Misses Pennefathers, that Gip and Pip whom all men loved and no one wished to marry, and who were to Mrs. Morshead the very head and ears of her biggest bête noire.

Poor, laughing, heedless Gip and Pip! The day had come

when their trimestral visit to that sour old Mrs. Morshead had to be paid; and they paid it for duty's sake and Augusta's. But it was a corvée, a fighting with wild beasts by no means agreeable to contemplate, and one where they knew they should come off the worst.

In they came with that general look of flush and hurry and taking life and circumstances by storm which was characteristic of them. Exactly alike in dress and person they were to Mrs. Morshead a reduplication of offence. She never knew which from which; nor did any one, indeed; so that it was impossible to take refuge from one with the other, or to change the venue and mitigate the nuisance. There they both were, one just like the other; their bright eyes roving round the room in the purposeless way of bright eyes conscious of their beauty, their voices clanging with loud but not unmelodious force, and their whole manner and appearance curiously suggestive of audacity, defiance and good-temper.

"How do you do, Mrs. Morshead?" both said in a breath "What a lovely day, isn't it? How do you do, Augusta dear? Isn't it splendid weather?"

"I never remember such splendid weather, do you?" Gip went on to say, in her loud, clear voice that reminded you of a cascade, it was so hurried, impetuous, and continuous. "And they say it's going to last for ever so long; that's awfully jolly news, isn't it? And so we are going to give a picnic on the strength of it; and you will come to it, of course, Augusta? All our friends are coming, and some from London, too. The Cowley boys will be here, and our own boys are at home now—Jemmy came last night"—Jemmy was a young sub-lieutenant in the navy, waiting for his ship—"and Colonel Moneypenny, nice old boy, says that he will come too and bring the champagne; and Sandro Kemp is to put us all into a picture—and Sandro is a great admirer of yours, Augusta, and is always talking about you; so is Colonel Moneypenny, too—so you will have two strings to your bow if you come; and, as times go, that is a very fair allowance for one woman and more than any one else will have!"

Here Gip laughed like a musical peal of thunder, and Pip laughed too, for company. Mrs. Morshead shot out her under-lip and put up her hands to her head.

"Good gracious!" she said crossly.

"What is the matter with you, Mrs. Morshead?" asked Pip sympathetically. "Have you a headache? I'm awfully sorry, I'm sure! Headaches must be such awfully disgusting things. I never had one in my life, except when I fell from the apple-tree and pitched right on the back of my poor little nut. And then it ached like fury. I thought it was all over with me, and I was never so frightened in my life. It was sickening. But it taught me to be careful how I trusted to those horrid old rotten branches again. The apples were prime, for all that, and worth a spill that didn't quite do for one."

"Perhaps, Miss Pennefather, you will be good enough to translate what you have said into English," said Mrs. Morshead, when Pattie stopped to take breath. "I am not of the new school, I am thankful to say, and I do not understand slang."

"Oh, I am sure, I am awfully sorry if I slung you any slang," said Pip penitentially. "You see we are so used to it from the boys when they come home that it slips out when one doesn't mean it. But, indeed, every one talks slang nowadays; you can't get on without. A girl looks such a stick when she does not talk like the rest; and I hate sticky girls. Neither George nor I are sticks; and we don't patronize the breed at home."

And at this she laughed in her turn, and Gip joined in without knowing why; and again Mrs. Morshead put up her hands to her ears and shot out her under-lip.

"Upon my word, Miss Pennefather, you and your sister are the two very noisiest young ladies of my acquaintance," she said angrily.

Pip laughed and Gip laughed.

"Well, I grant you, Mrs. Morshead, we are not of the mealy-mouthed mum kind," said the former, whose turn it was this time to undertake the terrible old woman. It had been her sister's in their last visit.

"You might be more like ladies and yet not mum or mealy-mouthed, as you elegantly express it," said Mrs. Morshead. "You are like two—I don't know what, in a room."

"Oh, we are nothing!" cried Pip audaciously. "You should hear the boys, how they sing out all over the place! They make such a row that sometimes you can hardly hear yourself speak. Even Mater, who is the dearest old lady in the world, can't always stand it, and is obliged to tell them to

shut up. And when Jemmy comes home, it is just awful, the stramash that goes on from morning to night! But Jem is awfully good fun and spins the jolliest yarns! He is a dear old man, and looks awfully handsome in his uniform, with all its gagits!"

"No; I cannot and will not bear it!" cried Mrs. Morshead, roused to that point of disgust which lies beyond endurance. "Miss Pennefather, your language is simply disgraceful; and if your own parents allow you to use words which are never heard in any lady's drawing-room, I do not. In my house, you will please to remember, that you are talking to a lady and you will behave like ladies—if you can."

"I am awfully sorry—" began Pip.

"No, you are not awfully sorry—not awfully anything," interrupted Mrs. Morshead. "I am very glad if you feel ashamed of yourself, because then perhaps you may improve; but there is no improvement possible while you use that most objectionable and foolish expression."

Pip looked at her sister and made a slight grimace; her sister looked at her and repeated the sign.

"I think it's time to go, Patrick," said Gip as a diversion. "We have no end of things to do, you know. So you'll be sure to come next Wednesday?" she added, turning to Augusta. "At Crossings Bridge, remember; two o'clock sharp; and if possible to bring a basket of gooseberries, do. You have awfully fine ones I know; and fruit is always good gear in a picnic."

"What are you saying? What are you asking?" said Mrs. Morshead savagely.

"We are giving a picnic, and we want Augusta," said Gip boldly.

"My daughter cannot go," said Mrs. Morshead; and as she spoke she planted her heavy old feet firmly on the foot-stool.

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead!" cried both the sisters together. "It will not be half the fun without Augusta."

"Mrs. Latrobe has her duties at home," said the terrible old woman, fixing her eyes with a stony stare on her daughter.

The delicate pink flush came up on the comely cheeks, but Augusta's voice and manner were as smooth and soft and unruffled as they always were.

"Do you want me at home, mamma?" she asked with perfect serenity.

"Do I want you at home? What an absurd question!" said Mrs. Morshead. "I do not *want* you at home, if you mean that, for you are not of much use to me at any time; but I should like to know what is to become of that boy of yours if you go out for the whole day like this? Do you expect *me* to be his nurse? And you know that I strongly object to his being in the kitchen with the servants."

"Oh, Tony comes too! He is such a jolly little chap, and we are all so fond of him," said Gip. "Certainly, you must bring the old man!" she added to Augusta. "That need not keep you; so now of course you will come?"

"If you really do not want me at home, mamma, it would be pleasant for the child and would keep him out of your way," said Augusta, to whom the prospect of a day's freedom from her mother was a boon too great to be refused if in any way possible to be accepted.

"Anything for pleasure and gadding about," said Mrs. Morshead. "At your age, Augusta—a widow as you are, with a dear little boy to educate and look after—I wonder at you for your greediness after amusement! It is not decent. When a woman has been married and left a widow as you have been—and under all the peculiar circumstances of the case"—she added with cruel significance, "I think she ought to content herself with home and home duties, and leave all this idleness to young ladies like the Miss Pennefathers for instance—young ladies who have nothing to think of, and no heads for anything but pleasure if they had."

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead, a little fun is good for every one," said Pattie. "And Augusta is so nice in a thing of this kind."

"Of course I would not go if you did not wish it, mamma," said Augusta cheerfully. "But if you do not want me for anything, indeed I should like it. You are going to Greenhill Falls, you say?" turning to Gip. "It is years and years since I was there. I should like it so much if I can be spared."

"As for sparing you, I can spare you well enough," answered Mrs. Morshead; "for you do not make yourself so very useful, Augusta, that you cannot be spared, if that is what you mean. What I object to is the principle. A woman of your age, and after what should have been such a sobering experience, flying over the country with a parcel of giddy gigglers just as if you were a girl yourself—it is not becoming and not decent, as I said."

"Just this once, Mrs. Morshead!" pleaded Gip.

"She will help to keep all of us young ones in order," added Pip.

"It would be very nice to see the dear old Falls again," said Augusta. "I remember so well the first time I went with you, mamma. I was just my little Tony's age, and I remember how you took me in your arms and carried me over the wet places in the field."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Morshead, shaking her head; "there are not many such mothers as I was to you, Augusta. And finely you have repaid me! But I have never been hard to you, bad a daughter as you have been to me. If you want to go and take the child with you I am sure I do not wish to stand in your way. I do not like all this gadding about, as you know, but I do not care for mere lip-service, mere grudging obedience. Go if you like. I do not mind being left alone all the day with no one to speak to. I am used to my loneliness. Oh, yes, certainly; go and enjoy yourself. Do not mind me. I am an old woman of no good to any one—only fit to be dead and buried."

"Not quite that, mamma," said Augusta; "but if you really do not care"—turning to Gip she added; "I will be at Crossing's Bridge next Wednesday, at ten o'clock punctually; and I dare say mamma will let me bring a basket of gooseberries with us."

"Shall I order Page to give you all the peaches and grapes in the hothouse?" asked Mrs. Morshead sarcastically.

"Oh, thanks, Mrs. Morshead!" answered Pip with exasperating gratitude. "That would be good gear! How awfully jolly! You are really quite too awfully good!"

"Well, as I am not quite a fool I do not think I will empty my hothouse for your picnic," said Mrs. Morshead, still satirically.

On which the two girls laughed, as at a good joke, and then took their leave, Gip saying in a whisper to Augusta:

"And mind you make yourself awfully killing, for I want you to look your very best. We are not going to have a single stick among us, and we are going in for a pocketful of fun all round. It *is* jolly that you are coming," she added affectionately. "We were in an awful fright that you wouldn't be let."

"Well!" said Gip to Pip, as soon as they had got safely outside the door; "of all the awful toads that ever lived that

Mrs. Morshead is the worst! How I pity that poor, dear Augusta, and what an angel she is!"

"If I had such a scarecrow for my mother, I would give her pepper, and make it hot," answered reckless Pip. "Ugh! It gives the back shivers!" she added, shuddering. "I declare I feel as if I was all over nasty creechers-crawl-up-yer."

"She is a horror," returned Gip. "How I wish that stupid old Moneypenny would make up his mind and marry poor Augusta out of hand. It would be only charity to save her from such an old Turk as that mother of hers. Poor Augusta! What a life she must lead!"

"I wouldn't be her for five thousand a year," said Pip energetically. "I would rather sweep a crossing or break stones on the road!"

"I should prefer the crossing," said Gip with a reflective air. "It's good gear to sweep a crossing in a club-street; and one would get one's self up to look awfully killing in a Dolly Varden."

"And perhaps catch a lord," said low-minded Pip.

"That would be jolly," returned her sister. "What would you be married in, Patrick?"

"Cream-satin," said Pip with commendable promptitude.

"What would you, George?"

"Cream-satin, too," was the answer.

And then they both went off into a discussion on those extremely problematical bridal dresses of theirs, and those wedding tours which at present were all about the grounds of Spanish Castles; and agreed, as they always did, down to the last square inch of "kilting," and the remotest little fact of their journey.

They had never quarrelled since they were born; and in the family they were known by the name of the Doves, when not the Inseparables or the Siamese, Castor and Pollux feminina, or the Cherrybles—which last word had the advantage of uniting two ideas in one skin, according to the phraseology of sub-lieutenant Jemmy, whose brilliant idea it was.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FAMILY AT SHERRARDINE.

It was the loudest, noisiest, best tempered, most unscholarly and most generous family in the county. There was not a

potential genius nor a present student among them, but there was not a coward nor a "crab," as they called the cross-grained when speaking among themselves—not one who would have told a lie to have saved his life, nor who would have forfeited his honour to have redeemed his fortune.

There were six of them for the first and most important batch—the twins leading off the family ball, as they used to say, followed in less than a year by Jemmy, the sub-lieutenant, with three other boys all treading on each other's heels as closely as might be. Then came a gap of ten years, when the circle was finally closed by the advent of a pretty little girl as the general plaything and universal delight. Thus the family proper—Nora not counting: being a kind of offset and common property—had the appearance of being all of one age. For Jack, the youngest, was as tall and almost as strong at seventeen as was Jemmy at twenty; and among the four there was not half an inch of difference in height nor two pounds to spare in weight. The whole six were fashioned after the same pattern—the boys being just as dark-haired, as bright-eyed, as loud-voiced and as socially audacious as the Doves: and, to a stranger, it was the oddest as well as the most bewildering thing in the world to see them all assembled together. It was impossible to tell which was which, until you had learned the minor signs. Even in the family itself mistakes in voices and backs were continually being made; and as for Georgie and Pattie, no one knew one from the other without her distinctive brooch. It was one of the favourite amusements of these two curly-headed young scamps to play practical jokes on the household by reason of their strange resemblance; and good-humoured rows were always going on because Jemmy said it was Gip who had picked that ripe peach which he had been watching, and Jack swore that it was Pip, and neither of the accused would tell which it was. When they changed or took off their sign-boards, as their silver name-brooches were generally called, not the mother herself knew them apart. And if she did not who else could? As for the boys, they borrowed each other's names and wore each other's clothes with perfect impartiality; and thus the Pennefather family had a queer shifting phantasmagoric kind of personality which made each member responsible for the follies committed by the whole together, to the destruction of all identity and the accumulation of individual blame.

It might have been supposed that the father and mother would have done something to keep all these turbulent elements in some kind of order; but Mr. Pennefather was still only a great boy himself, and Mrs. Pennefather was one of those good-tempered, careless kind of women who never look beyond the day, and who only desire to see people happy about them. Her motherhood was comprised in two things only—to keep her children in good health and to let them be happy in their own way. She would have been very glad if they could have sucked in learning with their oranges, but she objected to their being forced to learn against their will; and she would rather they were well-grown, vigorous, light-hearted dunces than leaders of the world's best thoughts by the sacrifice of the sunshine and laughter of their youth. She had married when only just seventeen; so that both she and her husband were even now in the very zenith of their own lives and far more the play-fellows than the guides or rulers of their children. Add to which, the consciousness of her aristocratic lineage, which lifted them above the level of the village-herd and absolved them from the obligation of class conformity and spiritless respect for other people's prejudices, and just so much income as gave them all they wanted—with a scramble—and their wildness, their audacity, their ingrained Bohemianism can be accounted for; if to some the explanation carried with it no justification;—as especially did it not to Mrs. Morshead and that other member of her social bête noire, Mr. Branscombe.

To Mr. Branscombe indeed, this noisy, unscholarly and unæsthetic family was intensely antipathetic; and he and Mrs. Morshead drove their little chariots of condemnation side by side over the Pennefather course; though even here they did not agree, save in their joint end of vilifying these social abominations.

To express his feelings, as well as to relieve his mind, the elegant Mr. Branscombe once drew a caricature which represented all the Pennefathers as rather curious-looking savages shooting arrows at an Apollo, crowned with bay and holding his lyre in his hand. The figure which did duty for the great god of light and poetry had as much of his own likeness as he could manage to give it; and the drawing was after his special manner—proudly independent of anatomy, proportion and perspective. The arrows were going all ways but the right, and would have hit the moon sooner than the

god; and the eight savages were very little above the artistic ability of the ploughboy's chalk-drawing on the barn door. But Mr. Branscombe saw in it his intention rather than the execution, and, under solemn promise of secrecy from each in turn, handed it about among the neighbours. And all save Mrs. Morshead basely laughed and hypocritically pronounced it clever and wonderfully amusing. But the terrible old woman, who also scorned a lie, when she gave it back said to Mr. Branscombe:

"Well! all I can say is, this is not my idea of drawing; and those things are no more like the Pennefathers than they are like me. They are not human beings at all; you might as well call them tadpoles at once."

"Ah, my dear lady," said Mr. Branscombe with sublime tranquillity; "it takes an education to understand true art. Only artists can appreciate artists."

To which Mrs. Morshead snapped for answer:

"I know a good thing when I see it, as well as any one else. But I don't call that good. I call it a horrid daub."

Mr. Branscombe never forgave that criticism, nor since then had he set foot in Mrs. Morshead's house; and he vowed he never would.

It mattered little to the Pennefathers whether Mr. Branscombe caricatured them or no. The whole family held him in the supremest contempt, as a poor creature not worth powder and shot and to be passed over with the contempt which great dogs feel for little ones. They laughed at his æsthetics, his foppery and his vanity; and he ridiculed the want in them of all that they despised in him, and added to it contempt for the manliness or vigour on which they most prided themselves. They thought him a jackass, and he thought them earthworms; they would not have given sixpence for all his art in a lump, and he would not have given a penny for all their stamina and tone.

So the little quarrel ran along the highway of life between Sherrardine and Rose Hill; but when poor Mrs. Branscombe died, it was Mr. Pennefather who wrote the most feeling note; it was Mrs. Pennefather who gave Stella the most sympathetic kiss on that first visit of condolence; and it was the six savages who, on the day of the funeral, felt the most dismal and sorrowful of all at Highwood, save Augusta Latrobe and Mrs. Prinsep. Blunt brains for the finer work of intelligence — these they undoubtedly had; but the

creatures had good hearts; and if logarithms were as a sealed book to them, human kindness was their daily primer. Resentment and constancy of ill-feeling were as little in their way as the higher branches of mathematics or the Hegelian philosophy. When the grave closed over the dead it closed also over the last shred of "misunderstanding;" and even Mr. Branscombe, who had all the tenacity of estrangement proper to a vain man, was forced to accept the olive-branch and bury the hatchet. This came all the more easy to him inasmuch as he received their frank surrender, not as sympathy with his sorrow, but as homage to his personality; and to pay homage to Mr. Branscombe was to possess yourself of that sentiment which did service with him for friendship.

The one blot in the picnic that was to come off was the fact that Stella Branscombe would not be there.

"I suppose it is impossible," said Jemmy with a slightly sombre air.

The Doves always accused Master Jemmy of being "hard hit in that quarter."

"Oh, well!" said Gip opening her eyes; "I don't think it would quite do to go to a picnic when one's mother has not been dead six weeks. What a muff you are, Jem, to talk such rubbish!"

"I don't see what harm it would do," said Jemmy. "It must be awfully slow for the poor girl to be shut up all the day long with only old Branscombe. I dare say he reads his poetry to her and plays on the piano as he used in poor Mrs. Branscombe's time. How sick I should be! I'd rather be mast-headed than listen to one of old Branscombe's yarns!"

"So would I," said Gip.

"How could you be mast-headed, Gip, when you are only a girl?" asked Jemmy gravely; for though given to practical jokes, the family, as a family, was profoundly literal.

"No, I don't suppose I could be. My petticoats would come in the way," said Gip; and then they both laughed as at a good joke, the point of which was intelligible only to themselves.

"It must be awfully jolly to be a sailor and a boy," said Gip after they had finished their laugh and come back to such common sense as they possessed.

"It's not all honey, I can tell you!" said Jemmy. "One gets pepper pretty often; and then it's stinging hot and no mistake!"

"Then you shouldn't do anything to get pepper," said Gip sagely. "You could keep out of it if you liked."

"Oh, it's all very well to say that, Gip!" said Jemmy from the height of his superior wisdom. "But no fellow can keep out of it; and I do believe those fellows give it to us to keep their hands in and just for the fun of the thing. Why the very blue-jackets say we often get jawed at when we don't deserve it; and so we do; and it's a shame. But it's jolly fun all the same," added the good-tempered young fellow laughing again; "and I dare say the youngsters are too cocky and want it taken out of them."

"I think you are improved, Jem," said Gip critically.

"Think so?" he answered. "If I'm not I ought to be, for I've been jawed at often enough!"

"I dare say it did you good," said Gip, still critical.

"What did him good?" asked Mr. Pennefather coming into the room.

"Being jawed at," continued Gip, with no more consciousness of vulgarity than she had of crime.

"Ah! you youngsters want the dust taken out of your jackets," said the father of the flock, neglecting his duty of rebuke mainly because he did not see it.

"Well, Pater, you didn't like it when you were a youngster yourself," said Jemmy. "And I don't suppose any one ever did."

"I don't suppose they did, Jem; but it has to be done all the same," answered his father laughing.

And then all three laughed, as Jem and Gip had laughed before; the moving cause, which would have been invisible to every one else, somehow clear as daylight to them. And at the sound of that well-known peal Pip, who was never far from her companion Dove, came jumping through the open window, loudly demanding what the fun was all about and what was up?

And when her sister answered: "Pater says we youngsters have to be jawed at for our good," Pip joined in the fun, and they went through a second edition with as much hearty zeal as they had gone through the first.

Undoubtedly they were the most mindless and unpoetic set of intellectual savages to be found within the four seas—and Mr. Branscombe's refined contempt was so far justified. And yet, might there not be something better even than art and poetry and philosophy?—Something that atoned for those

unidealizing brains, that childish laughter, those comparatively low aims of life?—Something that redeemed this endless rollick from absolute folly, because showing that it was not heartlessness if it was unquestionably mental vacuity?

To be happy in themselves, inoffensive to others, to abjure all active ill-nature and to do such good as they could in charity to the poor, made about the sum of their philosophy. No pessimist could have ever taught them the value of discontent, the good of doubt and disbelief of mankind at large, or the virtue of turning outwards all the seamy sides of every person and every thing. No political economist could have convinced them of the sin of almsgiving or the evil of going beyond the market-price in wages or gratuities. They were utterly and entirely dense on both these points; and it was fighting with bags of wool to demonstrate to them the enormity of charity or the check given to the progress of humanity and the improvement of things by the sin of cheerfulness and contentment.

Even now, when the last explosion of laughter because Pater had said jawing was a good thing for the young, had ceased, a characteristic piece of their general iniquity was perpetrated. Old Betty Bailey came whining up to the front door with her usual story of hunger and distress; and would the kind gentleman give her sixpence? for indeed she was but badly off, and ailing. And Mr. Pennefather, instead of sending her about her business and threatening her with the constable and the lock-up and the dread Bench on the Saturday, to teach her how to beg the next time, ordered the old sinner into the kitchen, where a glass of good beer, a loaf of bread and a screw of tea were given her, though every one knew that she made up, from one thing and another, nigh on four shillings a week; and it is possible to live on sixpence a day. On the basis of that sixpence a day Betty Bailey was rich; and if she would but have abjured tea and tobacco she would soon have been a capitalist. Instead of which, with her wealth of four shillings a week and potential saving of two in the month, she came begging and crying to Sherrardine; and Mr. Pennefather gave her doles just as if she had been poor enough to need them!

It was pauperizing the neighbourhood, of course, to go on like this; but the master of Sherrardine could not be made to see the thing in the right light or be brought to confess

that he was wrong. Lectured and argued with by travelling economists he stuck to his point with the tenacity of a woman, and held on to his peg when the ground had been cut to ribbons beneath his feet. He had only one argument, and he used it with exasperating consistency, even when he had been proved guilty of an offence to the community at large.

"The poor creatures are very badly off," he used to say. "I cannot sit in my own comfortable home with a good fire and a good dinner and not feel for their wretchedness. And if I feel for them I must help them; and political economy may go to the deuce."

He was a dense, woolly-headed unscientific son of Adam, granted; but there were men in the world perhaps a little worse than he—men to whom he could have given weight, yet ridden far past on the road which we generally call the road to Heaven; and, all things considered, society would not have made a bad bargain of it had it exchanged a few wiry prim-set virtues for some of his soft and generous faults.

They were all in the same way—all generous, open-handed, good-natured people who made war only against peevishness and churlishness in all their forms, and who thought life eminently worth living for all who did their duty and let unpleasant things slide.

After old Betty Bailey had been disposed of and the girls had told their experience at The Laurels—how cross Mrs. Morshead was and how sweet and placid Augusta; after they had reckoned up for the twentieth time the names and numbers of their expected guests at the picnic, and who was to bring what, they walked off to the billiard-room; Pater taking Pip and Jemmy joining with Gip. The girls were as fond of sport and games as their brothers and knew all the tricks with rod and gun and cue, with pistol, cards and dice, just as if they too had been born with the privilege of wearing knicker-bockers and into the inheritance of beards. They knew a few things more for which the world did not give them the credit they deserved; as, for instance, how to embroider workhouse sheeting into extraordinarily showy dresses looking as if they had cost, as they would have said, a pot of money, but of which the mercantile value was only a few shillings. They could trim their hats so as to fill the souls of their companions with envious admiration, but the material was little better than rags and snippets; and they

could make their own gowns with the help of fashion-books and here and there a pattern which they bought or borrowed, and which, being audacious and extreme, they always exaggerated beyond the line allowed by others. They were thoroughly handy girls, albeit of the tom-boy and audacious kind; though it must be confessed their work would not bear looking into and told best at a distance. But they kept all this industry, for which no one gave them credit, for the long winter evenings when the boys were away and no out-of-door amusements were to be had. In the summer they would have thought it a kind of high treason against the meaning of their existence had they pored over needlework instead of spreading themselves abroad in the garden and woods; and to "amuse the boys, poor old chaps," when they came home for their holidays from school, where they practised every virtue but that of sticking to their lessons, was the first duty in the Pennefather catalogue. Still, the Doves had the germs of domesticity in them; and, provided all the windows might be open night and day—in snow-time as in sunshine—provided they might jump into ice-cold water every morning and take a twelve mile walk, or its equivalent, every day—they would make good wives and managers enough. At all events, their homes would never be wanting in pleasantness nor amiability.

As soon as they got into the billiard-room, the mother and the other boys joined them; for they were always together when in the house; and the game went on with spirit. The four were fairly matched, and each made as good play as the other; and when any one made a miss or a fluke the whole family gave tongue at once and the uproar was simply deafening. Jack and Bob bet on Pip and Pater, Mater and Dick on Gip and Jem; and the interest was at its height, when the sound of wheels on the gravel, a loud ring at the bell and a sudden scuffling of feet and chorus of voices in the hall brought things to a stand-still. A moment after two well set-up young fellows came striding into the room, followed by the servants all in grins, and half a dozen dogs leaping up and barking a welcome.

Down went the cues and all abroad were scattered the balls. Bets, spots, places and play were forgotten, as the whole Pennefather family converged to one point, and "Well, Val! Well, Mil!" was shouted by the eight in concert.

"Awfully glad to see you, boys," was Mr. Pennefather's welcome; "but you have stolen a march on us. We didn't expect you till half-past six."

"We took the express and got out at Lingston," said one of the young men; "and then drove over in a trap. It was better than knocking about that smoky old Manchester."

"So it was!" they all said together; and then they all laughed—as only the Pennefathers knew how.

"Early or late, you are always welcome!" said Mrs. Pennefather prettily; and the boys and girls endorsed her statement with a volley of: "Oh, it's awfully jolly to have you sooner than we expected;" and: "It was awful good fun that you thought of coming that way!"

To which the young men replied in the same strain: "Yes, it was awful good fun; and the drive was quite too jolly!"

After this they all streamed out into the drawing-room, where they had afternoon tea and an "awfully jolly pile" of muffins, and were as happy as youth, good health and unbridled spirits could make them.

The two young fellows, who had come over in a dogcart from Lingston at the cost of another five-and-twenty shillings rather than knock about Manchester for a couple of hours, were of much the same kind and class as the Pennefathers themselves. Known individually at Sherrardine as Val and Mil—together as the Cowley boys—the world in general recognized them as Mr. Valentine and Mr. Milford Cowley, the only sons of Mr. and Mrs. Cowley, of Greyhurst Manor, Warwickshire. It recognized one of them too, as heir to a fine property and winked its wicked eyes when it discussed their intimacy with the Pennefathers. "Birds of a feather," it said—Mrs. Morshead, its spokeswoman; "but it was very convenient for genteel paupers like the Pennefathers to have about them birds with golden feathers like the young Mr. Cowleys, and no doubt those Miss Pennefathers would do their best to catch them. But if old Mr. and Mrs. Cowley did their duty they would put an end to the whole thing and take their sons out of danger. The Cowley boys, indeed!—Cowley fools if they did not see the schemes that were on foot, and victims if they gave in to them!"

This was Mrs. Morshead's verdict, representing the suspicious and censorious; but to no one at Sherrardine had the chance of Val or Mil falling seriously in love with Gip or

Pip ever presented itself as yet—and if the thing had been suggested to them they would have extinguished it by peals of interminable laughter.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE REWARD OF SACRIFICE.

Naturally, the picnic to be given next Wednesday by the Pennefathers was the great theme of present conversation at Highwood. It was to be a very grand affair, as the neighbourhood counted grandeur; and curiosity was on tip-toe, together with hope and anticipation.

Miss Dawson, the milliner, was in high glee at the whole affair. She was making a supremely good thing out of it, for all the young ladies had something new for the occasion, and trade, which was generally so slack at the little town, was stirred up into a very consolatory spasm of briskness and vitality.

Every one in the place was asked, as well as a fair sprinkling of those not immediately bound up with the fortunes of Highwood. And among the rest Hortensia Lyon, with her parents and Randolph Mackenzie, was invited; and no doubt was felt by the Pennefathers as to the glad acceptance of the four. But Hortensia, the pretty Puritan, was in the age when works of supererogation and acts of quite unnecessary self-sacrifice are more delightful than any other pleasures. Yearning for distinction, if not publicly in the eyes of men yet privately and to herself, she could not take things easily nor let herself go with the crowd. She must stand apart, and take up a moral pose that should single her out from the rest. She must sacrifice what would seem to be her natural inclination for the greater gain of her conscience; as now, in this matter of the picnic to Greenhill Falls.

When the note of invitation, written in Gip's big round sprawling hand, was brought to the family at Derwent Lodge, and Mr. Lyon, looking up from the chess-table where he was playing a bad game against his wife's worse, said kindly: "Good news for you, little maid!" and Mrs. Lyon, with motherly solicitude, added: "And you shall have that pretty new costume which Miss Dawson says she has just got from Paris—I dare say it only came from London—but it is the

very thing for a picnic,"—Hortensia answered with pious primness: "No; I shall not go. When Stella Branscombe is in such sorrow I do not think the Pennefathers should have given a picnic at all; and certainly I do not think that I ought to go to it."

"Oh, Hortensia, I say!" remonstrated Randolph.

"Stuff!" said Mr. Lyon good-humouredly.

"My dear!" said the mother; "you cannot refuse the invitation. It will look so odd if you, one of the young people of the place, refuse. You must go, Hortensia."

"No, mother; my conscience would not let me," said Hortensia gravely.

"Stuff!" again repeated Mr. Lyon; "stuff and nonsense, child. Are you going to make yourself talked about all over the place?"

"I do not care for that if I am conscious that I am doing my duty," said Hortensia.

"All right as a matter of sentiment, I admit, but the application does not fit," returned her father. "There is no dereliction of duty in going to a friendly picnic because poor Mrs. Branscombe died six weeks ago. You cannot live by the side of any grave, my child; not even by the side of your mother's, when that sad time comes——"—"Thank you, William!" said Mrs. Lyon with a displeased smile:—"Still less are you able to indulge in this kind of enduring melancholy for one who was only the mother of your friend."

"While Stella is unhappy I will not go to balls and things!" said Hortensia, raising her pretty eyes with a sorrowful look.

"But Hortensia, I say!" remonstrated Randolph for the second time.

To his good, uncritical and believing soul, the self-sacrifice of his little cousin was heroic, saintly, divine; yet for all that his own grosser humanity was too strong to make that act of renunciation acceptable. He loved her for her sweet and noble intention; but he wanted it to stop there and not go on into deed.

"Oh, it is only one of her fads! The child will never be such a fool. She will think better of it when the time comes," said Mr. Lyon, turning back to his game. "Check, my dear. No, don't do that. If you cover with your bishop I shall simply take him and you will be no better off than before. And—no, you cannot do that either. I have told

you twenty times, Cara, that you cannot castle out of check. You cannot get out of it; you are done for—check; check; check and mate. And now, my little maid, come here to me and let us make an end of this last bit of silliness."

"It is not silliness, father," said Hortensia gravely. "I am quite in earnest."

"And you do not see that you are casting a slur on others by your romantic self-sacrifice? You very good people never see that, it seems to me."

"I am casting no slur on any one, father."

"No? If it is right for you to abstain because Mrs. Branscombe died six weeks ago, then it is wrong for others to enjoy."

"It is right for me because I am Stella's spiritual friend," said Hortensia, drawing her lips together.

"And your cousin, who is here only for a short time?" her father asked, with a merry glance at Randolph.

"Randolph will not mind," said Hortensia.

"Oh, but I do," said Randolph with energy. "I mind very much indeed, Hortensia. It will be awfully slow without you or Stella Branscombe; and if you don't go I am sure I don't care to either."

"And what will people say if two old folks like your mother and me go to a thing of this kind, when our child, for whose sake only all these frivolous amusements should be undertaken, stays at home? Yet, it will be a pleasant day, and the outing will do your mother good; and I shall not be sorry to go to Greenhill Falls once more. It is two years now since I was there. Besides, I like to see young people happy. But what will people say if we go and you do not, eh?"

"It does not much signify what they say," returned Hortensia, always in her character of the faithful witness. "If you do not dislike going, and do not think it wrong—" She let her sentence finish itself in silence.

"But if I insist?" her father asked, with very make-believe sternness and very transparent severity.

She put her hand in his.

"You will not," she said with pretty solemnity.

"But *I* do, Hortensia; I do indeed," interposed her mother hastily. "I think it is all simply preposterous, and I insist on your going."

"No, mother, you will not force me to do what I think wrong," said Hortensia.

"What exaggerated ideas you have, Hortensia!" said her mother a little hastily. "We shall be having you find out that it is wrong to laugh next. It is absurd altogether."

Of her own free will Mrs. Lyon would not have "played" her daughter as did her husband. Had she had the sole management of this exaltée little head her rule would have been more defined and her line considerably shorter.

"We cannot help that, Cara," said Mr. Lyon hastily to his wife, speaking with something like displeasure. "She must think as she likes; of course we have only to take care that she does not go too far in what she does."

It was a pity, certainly, but he always took his daughter's part against her mother. He never scolded her on his own side, even when he finally forbade any overt act of folly; and nothing annoyed him so much as his wife's interference and rebukes. The fact was, he allowed no one but himself to resist his little maid; and had Hortensia been sly, which she was not, she would have always managed so that her mother should have opposed her, sure that then her father would have consented.

Mrs. Lyon sighed impatiently.

"You spoil her!" she said.

After which she took up her knitting and kept an ostentatious and affronted silence.

"I should be sorry to make you unhappy, my little maid, but I should be sorry to put a slight on the kind-hearted Pennefathers, too," continued Mr. Lyon, satisfied now that he had the field to himself.

"It will not offend them because *I* do not go. *I* am nobody. What matter can it make to any one whether *I* go or stay away?" said Hortensia with recalcitant humility.

"It matters to us and your cousin," answered her father.

"If Randolph is going to take Orders, as I hope he will, he might be better employed than spending a whole day in idle gaiety. He ought to begin now to give up the world."

She spoke with the prettiest little air of puritanical primness conceivable; but it was a provoking little air, too, and once more roused her mother out of her safe entrenchment.

"You take too much on yourself, Hortensia," she said hastily and with undeniable good sense. "At your age it is very unbecoming to take this tone of setting all the world to rights and being better than your neighbours. I am sick of all this folly; and I must insist on it that you come to your

senses and accept this invitation like any other rational person."

"No, no, Cara, we can scarcely do that," said Mr. Lyon. "The little maid must not be forced to do what she really thinks wrong. You see it is not anything very outrageous—not like making herself a Zenana missionary, or a hospital nurse, as was the craze a while ago—eh, lassie? But we cannot compel her against her conscience. We can only persuade. You take her in hand, Randolph, and talk to her," he continued, turning to his nephew for whom he had so much affection as would willingly have made him his son. "Perhaps she will be guided by you. Young people at your age often understand each other better than we old ones can."

"I am sure I shall not be guided by Randolph if I am not by you and mother!" said Hortensia, with a refreshingly natural outburst of girlish scorn. "Randolph is not likely to influence me," she added, meaning that she had the loftier views and the wider intelligence, and that it was she who took his mind in tow not he who could steer hers.

"Well! see what you can do, Ran," said Mr. Lyon in the tone of one who is tired of a discussion; and the rest, taking the hint, dropped the subject.

But Hortensia was left so far mistress of the situation in that she had not been dislodged from her position, and still kept her resolve to sacrifice the day's pleasure to friendship and to stand out from the common herd as the one devoted and unselfish soul among the crowd of self-seekers—the one faithful Abra who could mourn with the mourners and sit in the darkness with those whose sun had gone out, not only dance with those who piped and laugh with those who were glad.

Meanwhile nothing more was said at Derwent Lodge about the picnic, or who would or would not go. The invitation was accepted in general form; and Mr. Lyon believed in his power to make his little maid do as she ought when the day really came. But the mother, who knew the signs of the times better than he, enlightened as she was by the mysterious sympathies of sex, saw only too clearly that their tête montée enthusiast had determined to go her own way, and that nothing was farther from her thoughts than compliance with her parents' wish to make one of the guests at the Pennefathers' picnic.

"It is all William's fault," said Mrs. Lyon to herself

"He has spoiled the child so terribly there is no doing anything with her now. He will never let me interfere, and she can twist him round her little finger. If he would have given me my proper authority over her, things would have been very different"

And perhaps the poor dear woman was right; for without question Mr. Lyon had spoiled his little maid, though he did prevent her from doing anything irremediably absurd.

Sure enough when the day did come—and it was such a glorious day!—there was Hortensia in her black gown made with the ostentatious simplicity, the evident intention of mourning, which she had affected ever since Mrs. Branscombe's death. The delicate curves of her prim little mouth were drawn into so many straight lines; her sleek hair was taken off her face and bound round her head as smooth and tight as if it had been so much spun-silk wound by a machine round a wooden ball; her whole manner was instinct with that curious spirit of silent Puritanism which made her the voiceless preacher of Vanity and the nothingness of human pleasure.

"We shall have a beautiful day," observed Mr. Lyon, by way of opening the crusade.

"Beautiful!" echoed his wife, looking straight down her nose.

It was very naughty of her; she felt that it was; but really she was glad that William should be made to feel how foolish he was in spoiling the child as he did, and how much wiser it would be to give her, the mother, proper authority!

"How are we going?" asked Mr. Lyon, as if he had no doubts and no misgivings. "You and I in the victoria, Cara; and the two young ones in the dogcart? You do not like the dogcart, I know."

"I am not going, father," said Hortensia simply.

She was not in the least degree excited. Was she not testifying?

"Oh, stuff—yes, you are!" he answered, still cheerful and positive. "Why, I thought we had done with all that nonsense, my little maid! Is it to come over again?"

"I cannot go, father—I would so much rather not!" she repeated, tears coming into her eyes; for she was really in earnest, though she was silly and over-conscious. "I have promised Stella to spend the day with her. She will feel so

lonely, poor girl, to know that we are all enjoying ourselves, and she left out."

The blood came into Mr. Lyon's face in a flood, as it did when he was seriously annoyed. He loved his little maid—no father better; but he liked to have his own way too; he set store by his parental authority; and he had promised himself that he would make her yield in this matter.

"I think you would scarcely like to disobey me, Hortensia, if you knew how much you pained me," he said very gravely.

"I am so sorry, father," she answered; "but indeed it is against my conscience!"

"Your conscience should lead you to obey your father, Hortensia," said Mrs. Lyon unwisely.

"Now, Cara, leave her to me!" returned the father sharply. "She and I understand each other."

But if they did there was no outward and visible sign thereof, save such as could be found in Hortensia's red eyes and her father's artificial contentment when, after half an hour's private consultation in the study, both came back into the drawing-room with the air of people who have had a real quarrel and made only a half patched-up peace. However that might be, Mr. Lyon, heroically taking the burden on himself, announced that, as his little maid had such a strong objection, he would not force her to go; and while he spoke, Hortensia stood by with the oppressed kind of self-gratulation of a victor whose victory has cost her dear—but who after all is victor.

"You really do spoil her too much!" said Mrs. Lyon, with natural displeasure. "It is not kind to her, William, to give her her own way in this manner. She should be made to obey."

"You know nothing about the matter, Cara," answered her husband irritably. "If I say that her reasons have convinced me that ought to be enough for you."

"She makes a downright slave of you," returned Hortensia's mother, even more irritably than the father had spoken. "And every year things get worse."

"I am master in my own house," said her husband with a peremptory air. "And it is time that we were starting."

All this time poor Randolph had not spoken a word, but he was in misery all the same. He would have given half his fortune to have escaped this picnic from which all the sweetness and sunshine had gone. How far pleasanter it

would have been to have gone with Hortensia to Rose Hill where he too might have hoped to cheer Stella Branscombe—Cyril Ponsonby's Star and his! But he knew that his best breeding and his highest duty lay in simply accepting the dry husks of what might have been such a rich feast of enjoyment; so, with a very sad face and very reproachful eyes, he mounted the cob that had been assigned to him, while Mr. and Mrs. Lyon went on in the victoria, and wrangled all the way. They were a very affectionate couple as times go in this naughty world; but they were terribly put out to-day, the one by Hortensia's obstinacy and the other by her victory—and they revenged on each other the annoyance for which she was to blame.

So this was where the little Puritan's exaggerated sense of right had led them all—to the ill-humour and discomfort of her father and mother; to the disappointment and gloomy boredom of poor unoffending Randolph Mackenzie; and to the temporary annoyance of half a dozen other people, and especially of the kind-hearted Pennefathers themselves, who "wanted the thing to go."

She gratified herself however, though she pained so many; and when she found herself at Stella's—thanked, praised, condoled with for her sacrifice and caressed with loving gratitude by her friend—she thought that she had the fairest slice of the day's great cake. Her slice was even larger when Mr. Branscombe sent for her to go into his studio, where he sat in his elegant grey velvet costume, with the band of white crape round his arm to mark his mourning for a saint.

"This is just such a thing as I should have expected from you!" he said, holding Hortensia's hand in his long, white, scented fingers: "the delicate act of a faithful soul perfumed with angelic sweetness."

Hortensia blushed and looked delightfully pretty. The praises of her own conscience were pleasant, but Mr. Branscombe's were intoxicating. There was a fine nebulous suggestiveness about them inexpressibly fascinating; and she was not of the age to criticise or to detect the difference between words without meaning and full of lofty sound, and those which had a definite idea and an intelligible thought.

Mr Branscombe was her present ideal. He represented to her all that was most pure and poetic in man. She believed in his genius, in his loftiness of mind, in the touching

sincerity of his love, in the noble simplicity of his life—devoted as it was to Art, Poetry, to Music—to all which makes humanity beautiful, noble and refined. And again she found herself wishing that her dear father was as delicate and æsthetic as Stella Branscombe's! If only he had been, what a proud and happy daughter she would have been! But she noticed that Stella looked pale and weary, and that she said almost eagerly: "It is such a beautiful day, papa, may I not take Hortensia into the garden?"

"And leave the Threnody unfinished?—that beautiful Threnody on your dear mother? It is not half copied yet, I see," was the reply made with gentle reproach.

The girl sighed.

"I am not writing very well, to-day," she answered. "I have rather a headache; perhaps a little fresh air will do me good."

"Let us all go," said Mr. Branscombe, with a touching kind of dignity in his self-surrender. "My good little friend must not be saddened by too close contact with our grief. The fresh free sky for the fresh free heart—flowers for the young spirit—and the gay lilt of the glad birds for the gentle soul whose world is music. Yes, let us all go!"

"What a splendid man your father is!" whispered Hortensia with enthusiasm; and Stella lifting up her soft eyes full of love, answered:

"Yes, indeed, he is—splendid!" And yet she was sorry that he flattered her friend so very much! It was scarcely good for her!

"What happiness it must be for you to live with him in such an atmosphere of mind and beauty," continued Hortensia, her eyes glistening and her cheeks flushing. "All day long music and poetry—all day long, these deep thoughts and noble words—and you privileged to help in the work of such grand genius—you the first to read and hear! Oh, Stella, what a life!—how I envy you, my darling! how I wish it was mine!"

"It is indeed beautiful, and I am very much to be envied. There are few fathers like mine," answered Stella.

She spoke with perfect sincerity; and yet again she wondered, as she spoke, why she felt so tired of her enviable position and still more enviable work; and why she wished that she might be sometimes alone, when the privilege of her father's superior companionship was so great. She knew

that his art was supreme and of the purest quality; but she was conscious of a very strong and very reprehensible yearning to be able to read something beside his poetry, to play more than his music, to look at other than his pictures. And oh! if he would but turn to indifferent themes and leave her dear mother's dead memory in sacred silence! If he would but leave off writing Threnodies and Odes, dirges and funeral nocturnes which, he said, it broke his heart to write and which she knew it broke hers to hear! There was something in this incessant commemoration that jarred on her, she did not know why; but with all her admiration for his genius it seemed a desecration rather than, as he said, the consecration of that blessed memory through the homage of his love and the glory of his genius.

All this however she kept to herself, and the day of the picnic was passed at Rose Hill in perfect peace and outward satisfaction; Mr. Branscombe alternately repeating his own poetry and weaving glittering webs of praise for Hortensia Lyon—Hortensia in the seventh heaven of gratified vanity and genuine enthusiasm—and Stella feeling as if her guard had been relieved, and that she was free to wander off into an independent dream-land of her own, wherein she might meet her own true love, and forget all the distance that lay between them and the sorrow that had overshadowed them.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRYST AT CROSSING'S BRIDGE.

The Pennefathers were people who were notoriously lucky in all their undertakings, and whom Providence manifestly favoured. They invariably brought their undertakings to a successful issue, and when they gave picnics and garden-parties the very elements themselves conspired to make them go well. The national superstition about Queen's weather was transferred at Highwood to the family at Sherrardine; and halcyon days were certain when they launched their pleasure-boats. Of course it was just their luck to have such a glorious day as was this special Wednesday, when all the country-side, and some more into the bargain, were gathered at the trysting place, en route for Greenhill Falls.

"Fine day as usual!" shouted one.

"Pennefather weather!" said another.

"By George! I wish I had your luck," said Colonel Moneypenny, who was a pessimist in philosophy and believed in his own persecution by fate.

"When I want to succeed in anything I will get the Miss Pennefathers to take a chance," said Dr. Quigley, who had come to see the cohort set out, but whose professional duties prevented his joining in the fun.

He was a pleasant, well-liked and likely man of about forty; but though he paid compliments to every unmarried woman in the place and flirted in a mild way indiscriminately with all alike, no one had yet found the spell which should compel him to lay aside his bachelorhood—no one had yet dipped the net which should land him high and dry on the safe shores of matrimony. His freedom was the standing puzzle of the place and almost as many explanations were given of it as there are circumstances in human life; one bold guesser even suggesting a wife and family in the background, while another sketched out certain poor and disreputable relations who had to be kept out of his income if he did not wish to see them in the dock as thieves or in the Union as paupers.

Be that as it might, the cheery, likely and well-liked bachelor doctor went on his own way, equally ready with a joke or a piece of gratuitous advice, half an hour's flirtation with a pretty girl or a night's watching over a sick boy; knowing all the family secrets for ten miles round and telling none of his own; more than once helping on a marriage that hung fire but keeping well out of the range for his own part; loving his profession but always talking of retiring; constitutionally fond of pleasure and given to all sorts of manly exercises, but never allowing his personal desires to stand between himself and the most irksome of his duties. He was a fine fellow all round; and, not even excepting Mr. Pennefather and Mr. Lyon, both of whom were general favourites in the place, he was, without doubt, the most popular man in Highwood

As he stood now by the side of Colonel Moneypenny, with Sandro Kemp a little in advance, he made by no means the least noteworthy of a rather remarkable triad. All three men were tall; but, while Dr. Quigley was hard and muscular, like a man accustomed to an open air life, Sandro was softer in fibre though as powerful in build, and the Colonel was

spare, wiry and without an ounce of superfluous flesh on his whole body. In face the doctor was grave, smiling, cheerful, with quick observant eyes and the look of one whose every sense is sharpened by incessant use; Sandro Kemp was grave, tender, reflective, seeing only certain things and seeing those only for certain purposes; while the Colonel had the harassed and discontented expression of a disappointed man too proud to complain but too sensitive not to resent.

His grievance was that he had been ill-treated at the Horse Guards, and that his services had been passed over without the recognition which they deserved. Hence his very natural belief that England and the service were going at a hand-gallop to the deuce, and that nothing would save the nation but a strong reaction in favour of men of family, and the mob, with the plutocracy, sent to the rear. Sandro Kemp, for his part, thought that national salvation was to be found only in the possibility of every peasant's son rising to be Prime Minister if he had it in him; and Dr. Quigley had his panacea in medical supervision and scientific autocracy, by which no sickly man or woman should be allowed to marry; no unhealthy profession should be allowed to continue; and national rewards should be given to those who should lighten human labour and minimize the chances of danger by inventions and machinery. Of the three the doctor was the most practical, the artist the most poetical, and the soldier the best bred. But it must be confessed, his was good breeding with a rent in the purple; being of the kind which respects condition more than persons, and does not think courtesy the right of the inferior, though it may be given at times by the grace of the superior. Hence he always held his head a little high when he was talking to Dr. Quigley or Sandro Kemp—the one a country practitioner for all that he was an M.D., and the other an impecunious artist for all that he might have genius and was of good family, not ranking in his mind as gentlemen equal with himself.

While they were standing there discussing the weather-chances of the day, Augusta Latrobe came up, holding her little son by the hand. How pretty she looked in her soft black dress, from which that generous powdering of jet beads, wherever they could be put, took all expression of sadness! In no wise coquettish, she was yet a woman with a wholesome respect for her own charms and the determination to make the best of herself, according to her age, should she live to be

a hundred. She was never dressed too youthfully nor dressed too much; but she was never other than well and becomingly attired—her gowns fitting to perfection—her hats and bonnets suiting her as if the fashion had been expressly made for her—her boots and gloves and all accessories without a flaw that even the most critical could discover.

In the midst of the light colours which flooded the "field" to-day, her graceful figure, all black and sparkle, looked by far the most elegant and distinguished. And though most of the girls were many years younger—in the first blush of their spring-time, while she was in the rich summer of thirty-two—still she was as beautiful as the prettiest of them all, and perhaps with a deeper meaning in her charm.

As soon as she came up she was surrounded by the Pennefathers, with whom she was an especial favourite.

"How jolly of you to come in such good time!" cried Georgie; "and how quite too awfully nice you look!" she added; for though the main happiness of the Doves lay in fun and dress combined, they were neither jealous of the success of others nor niggardly in their praises.

"I am sure you look very nice too," said Augusta, smiling. "What pretty dresses you have!"

"Think so?—so do I. Miss Dawson made them, for we had not time; but we designed them; and I think they have come out pretty well on the whole. Do you like our hats? We got the idea out of the fashion-book, but we had them made miles larger, not to be just like other people, you know. And, don't you see?—I've got pink in mine and Patrick has blue; but I'll let you into the secret—we are going to change them and our brooches after dinner, and we shall have such fun! Mind you don't let it out! No one knows but you and us two—even the boys and Mater don't. It will be good gear, I can tell you!"

"That is a new phrase, Georgie," said Augusta, laughing. "Everything is good gear, now."

"That's Jemmy's word," she answered. "You know one can't help catching the boys' slang. They never talk anything else. But you won't tell, will you?"

"No! no! certainly not!" she answered; and as at this moment the Lyons drove up with Randolph Mackenzie, the noisy, good-hearted givers of the feast surged up to them, and Augusta was left standing near the three men, and nearest to Sandro.

It was no one's business to watch either Sandro or the Colonel; but Dr. Quigley made it his. Something in the face of each struck those quick observant eyes of his, and he looked from under the brim of his broad-leafed hat, first at one and then the other, and from them to the tranquil, graceful, comely widow.

A certain subdued eagerness, a certain half-beseeching, half-tremulous admiration shone like the sorrowful light of a strong man's tears in Sandro's earnest eyes. The blood left his cheeks and his lips were pressed together as if the sight of this woman brought him joy and pain together—the joy that he must not express, the pain that he could not conceal. The Colonel's thin, keen, furrowed face flushed like a girl's; yet his manner was stiff and dry, and he spoke almost as if he were displeased and scarcely on friendly terms with the widow of the Professor. He had had this manner ever since the day when Augusta Morshead had announced the fact of her intended marriage with Professor Latrobe; and her widowhood had not changed him. Before that day he had been the girl's most devoted cavalier; so much so indeed, that people had talked and speculated, as people will in country places where their neighbours' affairs are the most interesting things they have to discuss; but no one said anything now—though more than one had wondered "whether it would ever be on again with Colonel Moneypenny" when Augusta Latrobe came back, a penniless widow, with a child dependent on the questionable bounty of her hard-handed and bad-tempered old mother.

That speculation lasted only a very short time; and no one, save Dr. Quigley, saw that the Colonel cared more for Augusta Latrobe than he did for those Miss Pennefathers, whom he always called "Objectionable," or for Hortensia Lyon, whom he laughed at as a Précieuse Ridicule.

The pretty widow herself showed nothing. Certainly the faintest and most delicate pink tinge came over her whole face, like the far-off reflection of the Alpine after-glow as she turned to greet them all; and her eyes had a curious look of forced composure as they rested on each by turn, when she gave her hand and returned the conventional greetings proper to the occasion. But even Dr. Quigley's perceptions were at fault as to what that evanescent little flush might mean—and whether it meant anything at all or not; and if it did, for whom? and why? The widow was too well-inured to

self-suppression at that ungenial home where thorns and pitfalls abounded, to betray more of herself than she cared to show abroad; and among the many attractions of her character was this strange union of perfect sincerity with absolute self-control and as absolute reticence on all that she did not choose to make manifest. She once said to Dr. Quigley—who, by the way, got more out of her than any one else was able to do—that she never remembered to have betrayed by mere weakness and impulsiveness what she afterwards regretted to have told. If she told anything in confidence it was with the deliberate intention of bestowing that confidence; but she never let things slip from inability to hold them fast. And he believed her; as he was in the right to do.

Here again she held her own and baffled the friendly explorer who would have penetrated into the interior of her mind. Her manner to Sandro Kemp was exactly the same as her manner to Colonel Moneypenny; and when his own turn came, she gave him her hand and looked up into his face with her calm, clear untroubled eyes exactly as she had looked into the faces of the others; and the doctor saw no more for his part than the artist and the soldier had seen for theirs. She was sweet, smiling, cordial, gracious; but with no special meaning or application. She gave no one an inch more of velvet than she gave to another; and she was velvet-soft to every one alike. Still, there was something under it all; and that something—what was it?

By this time all had assembled; and now came the first act of the real drama—the order of their going and who should take whom—whereof this gathering at Crossing's Bridge was only the prologue. The Pennefathers were not people who patronized family exclusiveness on days of pleasure. To a husband any woman but his own wife; to a sister any man but her own brother. The cards had to be shuffled and fresh combinations made; and even staid old married folks, like Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, had to be dealt to other partners, with whom at least they could not spar and wrangle because a mother's influence had broken to pieces under a father's authority, and a father's authority had gone down before a daughter's desire.

The arrangements were not very difficult to make. Georgie and Pattie reserved for themselves, as a matter of course, Valentine and Milford Cowley; for which they got not a little

obloquy from those mothers and daughters who thought that the givers of a feast should be content with the crumbs, and that the sons of a wealthy landowner were dainties to be bestowed on the guests and not kept for the hosts. The four Pennefather boys, with Randolph Mackenzie and the other young men, were dispersed among the young ladies who were still on their promotion and unattached; but Freddy Grant and Louie Sturt, who were engaged, were sent off by themselves in a unity of bliss multiplied by two. Such of the elderly married folk as could not be paired with their kind were planted out where their chaperonage would be least obstructive; and then came the question of pretty Mrs. Latrobe and her escort, and who should have the honour of her safe guidance.

"You must go in our pony carriage with Colonel Moneypenny or Mr. Kemp," said Georgie and Pattie, the two speaking like one.

They were good-natured creatures, always ready to promote "cases," and to provide sheaths for "spoons" if hands were but kept off their own store. They were besides, honestly desirous to see Augusta well-married for the second time, and taken out of the cruel keeping of her mother.

"Which will you have?" they asked with generous intent.

As they wanted neither the artist nor the Colonel for their own share, they were quite willing that the widow should have her choice.

Sandro came forward with that hurried action which means desire, and the eager face which is substantially a prayer.

"I can drive Mrs. Latrobe," he said quietly as to tone and inflection; but his eyes were too earnest to be in harmony with his voice, and his hand visibly trembled as he thrust it into the bosom of his coat.

For a moment Colonel Moneypenny did not speak. Then he made a formal bow.

"If Mrs. Latrobe will trust herself to me, I shall be happy to be her escort," he said stiffly.

He could do no less than accept the challenge flung down by the twins; but he said no more than was absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, his pale, thin face flushed, as it had flushed before; and it seemed as if his heated blood would give him some difficulty to damp down.

Augusta looked smiling from one to the other; but over the heads of both, not frankly into their eyes. She seemed

to accept the little comedy as it was presented to the public, and to enjoy the small tournament that had been arranged for her honour—she, set in the place of the Queen of Beauty whose office was to declare the victor and bestow on him her favour.

Slowly she brought her eyes down from the angle at which they were fixed, to a level with the men's faces. She looked full at Sandro; not with defiance, nor yet with coldness, only clearly, calmly, with odd resoluteness and decision behind which could be read a certain tender regret. Then she glanced hurriedly at Colonel Moneypenny, glancing askance, not looking straight into his face as she looked into Sandro's.

"If Colonel Moneypenny will drive me?" she said in a clear voice and with a smooth smile.

Sandro turned away with undisguised disappointment. The Colonel's eyes flashed as if that troublesome fire were getting ahead of wisdom and making itself too evident for peace. But he did not speak. He only bowed again in his stiff, disagreeable, half-offended way, as he offered the widow his hand to assist her into the carriage, and noticed how pretty her feet were and how perfectly appointed she was altogether. Then he took his place by her side with the air of a man perfectly indifferent to his position and finding in it neither pleasure nor pain.

"I must take my child," said Augusta as the Colonel gathered up the reins and took the whip from the groom who had been holding the pony's head.

"Oh no!" said Georgie and Pattie. "The two young ones are going together with Mater and nurse Mary."

"Oh no, indeed, you cannot have Tony! And I'm sure Colonel Moneypenny don't want him!" said Gip with a little laugh.

"I would rather take him," said Augusta earnestly.

"Drive on, Colonel," shouted Pip who was anxious to be off. "Mater and Mary have undertaken the nursery. We can't change things now. Good-bye; and take care of Frisky down hill. He has an ugly trick of falling over his own toes!"

"Are we to go without your son?" asked the Colonel stiffly.

Augusta looked disturbed.

"I would much rather have had him with us," she said.

"Shall I insist on his being brought?" he asked again, always glacial and angular.

"By no means," said the two Doves authoritatively. "Drive on, do! You are keeping us all back."

The Colonel still held the whip pointed and the reins loose. He looked at the widow, as if for her final decision.

"Perhaps I had better not disturb the arrangements," she said with evident reluctance; and the Colonel, giving the signal, went off at a fast trot, finding it a little difficult to keep up his air of glacial and offended dignity and not to say frankly: "I am glad that I am to have you all to myself!"

But Colonel Moneypenny was nothing if not conscious of what was due to himself; and it was due to himself, according to his own ideas of things, that he should make Augusta Latrobe practically petition to be reinstated in his good graces—practically confess that she had done very wrong in marrying Professor Latrobe, and not waiting humbly in faith and patience for the hour when he himself should have asked her to be his wife. And to do this he must keep her at the arm's length where he had held her ever since the day of her engagement, and not let her think that she had only to smile to bring him to her feet again. Wherefore the drive, which cost poor Sandro Kemp so much pain, was the dullest, driest and most uninteresting of all in the day, so far as words and looks were concerned. Secretly, in his heart, the Colonel was profoundly content in spite of his angular outside; while Augusta more than once thought: "Would it do? Should I gain, both for myself and the child? or should I only exchange tyrannies and get no good from either?"

Meanwhile poor Sandro did his best to blow his little bubbles in that part of this frothy sea of so-called pleasure where he found himself; but taking a turn at the crank or a walk on the treadmill would have been almost as amusing as laughing at jokes which had no point, and flirting with girls for whom he had no inclination. The sun had gone out of the sky for him; and he thought that picnics and all kinds of open-air amusements were simply inventions of the Evil One—the most stupid, insane, disappointing, inartistic things that could possibly be devised for the torment of humanity. He was angry with fate, Augusta Latrobe, the Pennefathers, the sunshine and Colonel Moneypenny—all in about equal proportion. And yet, why should he make himself uncomfortable because the Colonel was driving Mrs. Latrobe in the pony carriage,

and he was with Jack Pennefather and the two pretty Miss Rayners in a phaeton? What was Mrs. Latrobe to him? What could she be indeed? She was perfectly right not to give him false hopes, and she had full liberty to encourage any one else. He could not marry; and the Colonel was a wealthy man and could. "Yes; she was perfectly right: and he was a fool to care about the matter. And those two pretty cousins—the Misses Rayner from London—were really remarkably picturesque-looking girls, and their heads would come in splendidly for the sketch which he had promised to do of the whole group.

Nevertheless, for all their prettiness, he found the drive to Greenhill Falls the longest, flattest and dullest that he had ever taken; and not even his artist's eyes could see the full beauty of the points by which they skirted, for that tugging at his heart-strings—that sense of emptiness and dreariness—which made the whole earth barren outside the limits of one sweet and gracious presence.

"It is madness!" he said to himself; "it is slavery unworthy of a rational man!"

All the same, he hugged his chains and cherished his delusions, and made such spasmodic attempts at bubble-blowing that the two girls saw through the effort and resented his preoccupation as an affront to their charms.

"The most stupid man I ever saw!" said each when the drive came to an end; while Jack Pennefather added as his contribution:

"Old Kemp was never much of a good thing; but to-day he was duller than old boots and as heavy on hand as so much lead. He wasn't worth his salt or the horseflesh it cost to tool him over, and I should have liked to have dropped him over the side. We should have been far jollier without him."

So they would—poor, sad-hearted and uncomfortable Sandro, for whom the sun had gone out of the sky and the earth had suddenly become barren because Augusta Latrobe was sitting by the side of Colonel Moneypenny in the pony carriage, and he was half a mile in the rear with the two Misses Rayner from London and that idiotic young Jack Pennefather.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE POCKETFUL OF FUN.

Whether long or short to the minds of the wayfarers the drive to Greenhill Falls came at last to an end. There were no adventures by the way and not the faintest approach to an accident. Frisky stumbled once in going down-hill, according to his habit; but the Colonel pulled him up in time, and gave him a savage cut with his whip which was less for the beast's correction than the man's ill-humour. The children were good and neither wanted to commit suicide by climbing about the seats, nor demanded impossibilities in the way of food and amusement. One by one the carriages drove up to the camping-ground; and the inmates were greeted as vociferously as if they had not been seen for a twelvemonth, and had come safely over the pass of the Tête Noire at least. To see all those bright faces, to hear all those pleasant voices, one would have thought that no sorrow existed on the earth to sadden the sons and daughters of men, and that the days of that long looked-for Utopia had at last set in.

What a noisy, joyous little company they made! and what fun it all was! While the cloth was being laid that fun was at its height. The unpacking of the baskets was a succession of surprises, each more delightful than the other. The shouts of admiration for the Colonel's generous supply of champagne, and for Augusta Latrobe's gooseberries and hot-house grapes; for the terrible old woman was either too human at bottom, or too proud to let her daughter go empty-handed to the feast; the enthusiasm excited by the Misses Rayner's superb pâté de foie gras, sent as their contribution by the parents Rayner in London; the laughter raised by the multiplicity of screws of salt and cones of sugar; the prospective enjoyment contained in the quarters of lamb and sirloins of beef, the chicken and veal-pies, the salads with lobster and the salads without—in the bottles of custard, of cream, of milk, of lemonade—in the tarts and cheesecakes, the jellies and big plum-cakes; the delightful occupation of gathering sticks and boiling the water in a kettle that would not hang over a fire that would not burn; the mess made in breaking the eggs for an omelette, and the queer compound

which went under that name when all was done; the fights with earwigs and "harvest-men," wasps and beetles which went on without intermission; and then the uncomfortable seats found on tree-roots and jutting stones, with ants crawling up from the ground and green caterpillars dropping down from the trees; oh, the fun of it all! What was there to compare with a picnic? thought all the young people in a body; and what plague, equal in horror, had ever been invented by madmen for the torture of innocent human beings? thought the Colonel, who hated to be disturbed in his habits and who was not specially affected towards the Pennefathers. But he was in for it now and had to make the best of it, pretending the enjoyment, which he was far from finding, in eating his own dinner by snatches while he supplied the ladies without delay and disputed with creeping things the best morsels on his plate.

Gip and Pip were completely in their element, and outdid themselves in noise, good-nature and slang. The boys were ubiquitous; and it seemed to each guest as if he or she were asked four times over by the same person whether he or she would not have more of this or some of that?—going through all the dishes on the cloth. Val and Mil Cowley kept close to the skirts of Gip and Pip, and behaved rather shabbily to every one else; but though the twins flirted generously with them they flirted generously with every other man about the place, and no one could complain that he was left out in the cold: Sandro Kemp, partly prudent, partly heart-sore, kept rigorously away from Augusta Latrobe for the first half-hour of the time; but after then his prudence came to an end, his heart-strings tugged too hard, and, almost without knowing how, he found himself by the fair widow's side, looking into her face for some sign of love with eyes which betrayed his own.

But when Augusta had made up her mind and marked out her course she kept to it; and not the keenest observer—not even Dr. Quigley had he been there—could have detected the faintest, most shadowy sign of that which poor Sandro was yearning, longing, hoping to see. Yet, that she should speak to any other man than himself with frankness and gracious sweetness annoyed the susceptibilities of the peppery-tempered Colonel. During that tête-à-tête drive to the Falls he had thawed to an immense extent internally, though externally his manners had remained just as glacial as ever;

but he knew in his own breast that the old charm had begun to work again, and that Augusta Latrobe was almost as beautiful to him, and almost as desirable, as Augusta Morshead had been. He intended however to prove her thoroughly before committing himself irrevocably. That is, he intended to repeat the mistake of the past by which he had lost her once already. If, during this period of proof, he saw any symptoms of leaning to this side or that—any signs of possible favouring one or another—he would banish her from his thoughts, leave her to her fate, and close for ever against her that golden door through which, if she were wise and good, she might pass into the happiness of his home, the sufficiency of his fortune, and the honour lying in the name and state of Mrs. Colonel Moneypenny.

He had no suspicion of any one. Since her widowhood and return to the old home Mrs. Latrobe had lived with such supreme discretion that she had escaped even the microscopic research and the megaphonic talk of a small country place like Highwood; and no one had coupled her name with that of any desirable bachelor here or elsewhere. Sharpened as his eyes were by suspicion and distrust, watching keenly and eagerly as he did, he yet could not see anything in her manner to Sandro Kemp which should cause him a moment's uneasiness. Certainly, he did not like that fellow's following her up as he did, as he had not liked the choice and juxtaposition of the start; and for a word or look the jealousy, inseparable from that damped-down fire in his heart, would have blazed out heaven-high. But Sandro's back was turned to him at this moment, and the widow's calm face and quiet air betrayed nothing. So the rupture which was threatened for just one brief instant was happily got over, and the Colonel signified his silent forgiveness of a problematical sin by going up to the two as they sat a few feet apart under the trees, and making the third in their conversation.

When the dinner was quite over and the servants' turn had come, the company all paired off and strolled away to the ostensible object of the day—the Falls, which were about a mile distant. Gip, with the keen "flair" of her kind, saw how things stood with poor Sandro Kemp; and, sympathetically inclined to give all "cases" a helping hand when she could, she determined to put a spoke in that old Colonel's wheel, as she irreverently phrased it, and to give poor old Kemp a chance. Just as they were all gathering themselves

into little knots, or segregating themselves into pairs, she, standing with Val Cowley and Jessie Rayner—of whom, by the way, she wanted to get rid on her own account—called to Colonel Moneypenny just as he had ranged himself on Augusta's right hand, Sandro Kemp being on her left.

"Oh, Colonel Moneypenny!" she said; "do come here and tell us the name of this awfully funny little flower! I know that you are a tremendously good botanist, and Jessie Rayner is wild about botany. Do come, please; we are so awfully anxious to know."

"I assure you, Miss Pennefather, I know very little indeed about flowers," said the Colonel crossly, and not quitting his post. "Mr. Kemp is a far better botanist than I. Ask him."

"My knowledge is exceedingly superficial. I am afraid I should be of no use to any one," said Sandro quickly. "I yield the palm to you willingly," he added, turning to the Colonel with a smile.

"It would be absurd in me to pretend to know anything about it," said the Colonel angrily.

Surely never were two men in greater haste to proclaim their ignorance of a science wherein both were notoriously proficient!

Gip laughed till the echoes rang with her voice.

"How awfully funny!" she said, looking at the Colonel through and through. "Only last week you told me that you had made a collection of all the flowers to be found about Highwood, and that you found there were some awful lot—I forget now how many—a thousand or a million, or something. Come along and don't be ill-natured!" she added familiarly. "What a character the Highwoodites will get if you won't do a little kindness like this! What will Jessie Rayner say of you, I wonder?"

"Oh, don't bring me in, Georgie!" said Miss Rayner hastily. She too had seen a little into the meaning of things; and for a pretty girl from London, fashionably dressed by Madame Elise and used to homage, it was too humiliating to be twice slighted on the same day and to have two men preferring a woman ever so much older than, and not so pretty as, herself. "I should be very sorry if either Colonel Moneypenny or Mr. Kemp gave himself any trouble on my account," she added stiffly. "I can find out the flower by myself."

"If I can be of any use to you I am sure I shall be most happy," said the Colonel, stung into gallantry, and going up to those two tiresome girls behind whom Valentine Cowley was standing, waiting for his turn and sure of Georgie's tact.

"Shall we go on?" asked Sandro of Augusta, his heart beating fast and his voice a trifle husky and unsteady.

For just one short moment the widow hesitated, thinking rapidly;—what was the wisest thing to do? Should she escape from the danger of that uninterrupted companionship by joining the group of unwilling botanists? or should she trust to herself and go with Sandro alone? To do this would anger the Colonel, but to go up to him and wait for him would have the look of running after him—would be compromising herself both openly to the others and privately to himself.

She knew that she could, if she would, win that trick in the great game of matrimony. It was not for nothing that she held her passions, her weaknesses, her desires so well in hand to give the lead to her reason and perceptions. She saw through the glacial surface down to the smothered fire beneath, and knew that it depended only on herself which should gain on the other. But she had not finally determined. Life at her mother's home was emphatically torture; would it be much better at the Colonel's? No; she had certainly not finally determined; and in view of all that was and might be—of her own indecision in some things if resolute determination in others—she quietly accepted Sandro's proposition and said:

"Yes, let us go on. They will soon overtake us."

"I hope not," said the artist.

And Augusta wisely did not hear.

She was right, however. In a very short time, and before Sandro could tell her about the good things which had come to him, the Colonel and pretty Jessie Rayner joined them as they were crossing the meadow—all four walking abreast—Sandro Kemp and Miss Rayner on the outside, by which the Colonel was next to Augusta in the middle. This arrangement answered very well so long as they could walk in open order over the lately mown grass; but when they came to the narrow pathway through the boggy waste, where only one could go at a time and where the ladies had to be helped over the stones and what the Pennefathers called the squashy

places, then the efforts which each made to out-manœuvre the other were marvels of generalship.

The victory rested with the artist and the Colonel was out-generalled. It was Sandro who helped the pretty widow over all the bad bits;—Sandro who held her hand when she crossed the rude stepping-stones or jumped the narrow brook;—Sandro who took her as his own care by right of assignment and appropriation, while the Colonel was left to fatigue-duty and Jessie Rayner. It was a voiceless, weaponless duel, but it was a duel all the same; and from that day Sandro Kemp might count as one of the facts of his life, the deep and passionate enmity of Colonel Grey Moneypenny.

This was the only hitch in the day's enjoyment, and when they all gathered in a body at the foot of the hills, the noise and fun and laughter broke out afresh, all the more sweeping and intense because of the interval of comparative repose gained through the scattering of the elements.

Gip and Pip changed their hats and their name-brooches, and no one knew one from the other. Val Cowley, who had been making confidences to Gip, repeated his lesson to Pip, to that naughty hussy's supreme satisfaction; and Mil, who had just told Pip that he thought her the jolliest girl in the world, said the same thing to Gip and entreated her to give him back the phrase with interest. Mr. Lyon continued with one sister the conversation he had begun with the other; Jessie Rayner complained to Pattie of the false position in which she had placed her by forcing her on Colonel Moneypenny; the boys themselves were taken in; the father and mother were puzzled; only Augusta, who was in the secret, and little Nora, who had landmarks of her own, saw through the joke and wondered in what the fun consisted. That there was some tremendous joke in the mystification was evident, but to no one but themselves and the boys, when they were told, was it in any way intelligible. They however, laughed as if they would never leave off; and when they were told the Cowley boys laughed too, but not quite so heartily as the Pennefathers.

The only one of the young men who was not thoroughly amused was Randolph Mackenzie, though he had sense enough not to betray his dulness. The general gaiety was so far infectious in that he found himself compelled to laugh when others laughed; to flirt with Gip and Pip when flirting was evidently expected of him; to make his towering

height of six feet two, with bulk in proportion, as ubiquitous as if he had been a smaller man; and to do all that was expected of a good-looking young fellow in an assembly where, as the Doves had said, there was not a stick of a girl nor a crab of a man, and where, if the fun was of the most innocent and harmless kind possible, it was also of the noisiest and most rollicking.

But in spite of that superficial infection, his honest heart turned ever back to his little cousin who had sacrificed herself so nobly to his idea of duty—but what a will that quiet little creature had!—and to that dear beautiful noble-hearted Stella—Cyril's Star; and because Cyril's then his as well—who had given up her love for her duty, and who was so sad and pale, so patient and unhappy! What odd things women are! he thought as he stood a little apart from the rest looking at the tumbling waters and seeing nothing of those falling sheets of foam, those rising veils of spray. They had a moral code among themselves which man did not share nor yet understand. It was doubtless far higher and purer than what he had on his own side, but it was incomprehensible all the same.

Randolph Mackenzie was one of those young men to whom a good girl is a thing to be wondered at, a little feared and very much respected. She was something precious and mysterious; something removed from the full comprehension of men because standing on an infinitely higher platform. Her very ignorance of the evils into the knowledge of which even little lads at school are initiated, gave him a curious sense of awe. When with such girls as his cousin and Stella Branscombe, he felt as if standing in some holy place, in the presence of some sacred shrine where no sinful thing might be. It was as if he had to put off part of himself when with them; to be pure and humble, reverent and careful, as they also were pure and noble. It was a great mystery, this virtuous and innocent girlhood!—and while he thought this the loud laughter of wild Georgie Pennefather rang in his ear as she clambered up the rock in front of him and shrieked out to Milford Cowley: "Where's Georgie, Mil? I wish you would fetch her and Val; or stay—do you go, Randolph. Tell George and Val we want them up here."

The final act of the merry drama was set when Sandro Kemp was reminded of his promise to "make a picture" of the party. Naturally each girl wanted to be the most con-

spicuous of the group, and all lamented that Sandro was not a photographer, when it would have been so much easier to have posed and the result would have been so much more like. Sandro, however, put Augusta as the "point de mire." He said he wanted her black dress in the composition;—and when an artist says that he wants something for his picture it is useless to discuss or dissent. He placed them all just as he would have them; and resisted the temptation to caricature Colonel Moneypenny. This was his day's sacrifice to a higher principle—the suppression of self by the generosity of pride.

But the Colonel, annoyed on all sides as he had been, resented the picture-making as if it had been an intentional personal affront. It was the last drop in the cup—the last straw of the pack. He was horribly ill-tempered all the way home, and Frisky had a bad time of it. He was not certain whether he ought or ought not to be jealous of Sandro Kemp—a man whom he called that "artist fellow," and held as neither his equal nor yet a real gentleman. If he ought, then all was over between him and the fair-faced widow; if he had no cause, why then he might see about it.

He was full of these dumb weighings and balancings, full too of pinpricks and uncomfortable places; and he made the drive as he was himself. He relented however, just as he neared the gate of The Laurels, that formidable home where, if he did not know all, he guessed something of what the poor dependent daughter suffered. When he parted from her at her own door, he pressed her hand a little more tenderly than he had intended, and looked into her face with a decided softening of his own. Pinched and furrowed that keen and haughty face always must be; but it could be as gentle as it was sometimes haughty, as soft as it was sometimes stern. It was gentle and soft enough now, as he looked right into Augusta's eyes while he held her hand warmly clasped and said below his breath: "God bless you."

Then the door opened and shut, and the young widow passed from the love and gaiety and pleasantness of the outer world into the darkness of the prison called by courtesy her home—that home where she was Cinderella among the ashes whom the fairy godmother had forgotten.

She had one joy however, in her happy little son, who, having preceded her by half an hour or so, came running into her arms as she crossed the hall, saying:

"Oh, mamma, what a jolly day it has been!"

This was the latest addition made to his vocabulary. It was a present bestowed on him by little Nora, and the earnest of future chidings and more than one slapped little hand as a reminder that "jolly" was a word not to be used at The Laurels, and that as often as he used it his grandmamma would "spat" him.

Hortensia was at home when her parents and Randolph arrived. She had had a day after her own heart, and received them all with the sweet serenity of one whose conscience is clear and who has done the right thing. They had sacrificed to Baal in the person of the Pennefathers, and she had carried incense to the altar in the person of Mr. Branscombe. She would not reproach them; only, she did feel very much their moral superior as she met them at the door and asked them if they had enjoyed themselves? remarked that it had been a very fine day; and said she was so glad to see them safe again at home!

She kissed her father and mother and smiled quietly at her cousin; helped her father to take off his stone-coloured alpaca dust-coat; asked her mother if she should carry her bonnet upstairs and bring down her cap, to save her the fatigue of mounting those low, broad steps?—and stood on a pinnacle of righteousness and in the consciousness of victory all round. She had been the sweet and spiritual Mary—now she was the quiet, homestaying, helpful, able Martha; and they were pleasure-seekers of a rowdy and objectionable kind. And she meant that they should take the lesson to heart and see things as she saw them.

Then the night stole on and the day came to an end for all alike; and of the Pennefathers' famous picnic nothing was left but empty bottles and fragments of food, torn gloves, soiled gowns, a few dreams and some regrets.

CHAPTER XVII.

ROCKS AHEAD.

The morning after the picnic Randolph Mackenzie was mooning about the garden at Derwent Lodge, by no means in a joyous frame of mind. Something about that noisy rollicking yesterday had left a bitter taste in his mouth; and he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment and dis-

satisfaction for which he could find neither a name nor the cause.

For one thing indeed, he was sorry that his little cousin had not gone with them. That little cousin of his was wonderfully good, and he cordially acknowledged how superior she was to the ordinary run of girls. Compare her with any of those at the picnic yesterday—why, she stood a head and shoulders above them all in moral measurement! She was almost too good indeed; and Randolph caught himself out in the vileness of wishing that she was just a trifle less superior—that she could sometimes come down from her pure altitudes and condescend to the natural weaknesses of an every-day, but all the same an amiable, humanity—so much weakness for instance, as should include her father and mother, his good uncle and aunt. Her evident moral superiority over them, when they came home last night, had undeniably rubbed him the wrong way. He had felt it at the time and he felt it now just as keenly as then. He did not mind for himself. Hortensia was right to feel that she was a bright and shining light where he was not as much as a candlestick. But he did not like to see her so conscious of having taken higher rank in the hierarchy of virtue than that to which her good parents had attained. It savoured too much of spiritual pride for his taste; he being one who would have prayed with the publican rather than have justified himself with the Pharisee. And it seemed to him that what uncle William and aunt Cara thought innocent, Hortensia might accept as allowable. And on the whole—though it was very sweet of her to sacrifice her natural inclination for pleasure to friendship and Stella Branscombe—still, it would have been more graceful and more dutiful had she given way to her parents and done as they wished.

Then there was that beautiful Stella herself; she too, was a difficult bit to rightly adjust in his moral mosaic. He had received this morning a letter from Cyril which had stirred up in his heart the natural sympathy of youth for youth, of man for man, and had filled him with pity for his friend, indignation against fate and doubt and perplexity all round. Sending all sorts of fervid, half-mad messages to his Love—for all that they daily exchanged long letters full of hope or fear, of love or assurance, as they were shaken by each passing mood—like that catching of the straw by the drowning man, poor Cyril seemed to have some kind of vague hope that the

presence in Highwood of his friend, his chum, his faithful Pylades, would work a miracle in his favour. It was a link, at all events, if a slender one; and the poor fellow was in that state of despairing trouble when even the weakest tie is better that none at all. But it laid a heavy weight on Randolph's heart; for the good, honest, stupid fellow well knew that he could do nothing. Stella, like Hortensia, had sublime reasons and far-reaching arguments for doing as it seemed to him less humanly than magnificently; and he could neither understand the one nor refute the other. The very difficulty which was annoying him at this moment in the adjustment of his moral mosaic was just the true answer to this question:—Was Stella right to postpone her marriage in this indefinite way, and to give Cyril so much pain and disappointment simply that she might stay and keep house for her father, and copy out his manuscript poetry and music? She was noble, pure, high-minded—all that and more; but, like Hortensia, might she not carry her virtue a trifle too far, and by becoming too angelic cease to be sufficiently human? "Excelsior" is a brave motto; but one might do better for one's self and for others than to be found by dogs frozen to death in a snow-drift!

It was a hard moral problem, and one that he could not solve, try as he would. It was a kind of cleft-stick in which he found himself—a spiritual "pons asinorum," where virtues were the angles and motives the straight lines—a true ethical dilemma, with friendship on the one horn and principle on the other—and he was in the blundering perplexity characteristic of men with small reasoning powers, wholesome instincts and strong affections, when those whom they love go over their heads in morality and do as it seems to them wrong from the basis of an over lofty right.

He stood by the netting of the tennis-ground, apparently studying the size of the meshes and trying the strength of the stays, while in reality fretting himself into a mental fever because two pretty girls were so distractingly good and overwhelmingly high-minded. Presently Hortensia came out to join him. In the programme of her duties as it was to steady her cousin's fluid inclinations and induce him to take Orders, she was ever on the watch for favourable moments; and here was one eminently favourable. To make this stalwart, natural pioneer of practical civilization into a meek country curate, absorbed in old women and young ladies—in the just distri-

bution of flannel petticoats and the nice observance of ecclesiastical drill—seemed to her a work of spiritual charity worthy of all effort, and where success would be its own reward. As for such a thing as natural fitness for the work of the sinful world, or natural unfitness for the sublimer reaches of spiritual life, Hortensia was far too zealous to allow the force of this kind of chilly, soul-destroying reasoning. "You ought," with her, was the serpent which swallowed up all those weak, protesting little snakes of "cannot," and "would rather not;" and specially did she despise her cousin's little snake of natural disinclination—as indeed, to tell the truth, in her own heart she despised all that was characteristic of him throughout.

When therefore, she saw him standing idly by the netting studying the meshes of that frivolous bit of reticulation, the pretty Puritan laid aside her morning task of making rough little shirts for the Mother's Bag, and turned to her more congenial employment of exhorting and proselytizing.

But Randolph would not give her missionary efforts a chance to-day. He was too much absorbed in the affairs of others to have any interest in himself. Cyril and Stella, and Hortensia herself, were far before his own future profession; but as he was not quite up to the work of attacking his little cousin offhand, he fell back on Stella, and through her on Cyril.

"How was Stella Branscombe yesterday?" he asked quickly, eagerly, so soon as her cousin joined him.

Good manners obliged her to answer him.

"Stella? she was quite well," she said a little pettishly; though had the girl been ill Hortensia would not have seen it, swept away as she had been in the frothy flood of Mr. Branscombe's sonorous nonsense. And, indeed, for the matter of that Stella was not well; and day by day got steadily lower in tone and more depressed in mind.

"Was she in good spirits?" he asked again.

"Randolph! how could she be in good spirits when her mother has been dead only so short a time!" was Hortensia's grave rebuke.

"No; of course not; not really jolly; but there are degrees, you know," said Randolph, sensibly if clumsily. "Did she speak of Cyril? Did she seem to regret him in any way?" he then asked in the same headlong way as before, unconsciously blocking up the avenue against his cousin's proselytizing intentions.

"Certainly not," said Hortensia, pinching her lips. "She is too much devoted to her father to think of any one else."

"Her love for her father has nothing to do with her love for Cyril," said Randolph. "Surely it is a girl's duty to love the fellow to whom she is engaged!"

"But she owes her first duty to her father," said Hortensia. "And such a father!" she added with enthusiasm. "Stella is blessed and honoured in giving her life to such a man as that! She will never have such glorious happiness as she has now!"

"Oh, I say, come now!" ejaculated Randolph. His cousin's ardour disconcerted him. "You go too far, Hortensia. Mr. Branscombe is not all that by a long way! I confess he is much too fine for me. I cannot digest such a lot of cream and sugar. It is all too hot-pressed and superfine all round," he added, with a generous confusion of similes.

"It pains me to see you incapable of appreciating such a pure and delicate genius as Mr. Branscombe's!" said Hortensia with severity.

"At least I appreciate you and Stella Branscombe," was the answer made with affectionate gallantry.

But the prim little face did not relax. If she had to convince Randolph of his present state of moral blindness and spiritual abasement, and convert him to higher things, Hortensia felt that she must not humour his weakness nor submit to his follies. And compliments are follies—unless rendered sublime utterances by such poetic genius as that possessed by Mr. Branscombe.

"Stella is very good in her way," she answered gravely; "as for me, of course, I am nothing!—but though Stella is very nice and dear, she is not equal to her father. She is of silver if you like, but Mr. Branscombe is gold, pure gold!"

She raised her eyes as she said this, and looked up into the sky as if worshipping the clouds overhead.

Frederick Branscombe, handsome, old, showy, well-preserved, full of frothy sentiment and of superficial talent, talking rubbish in hazy language and a stage voice, uttering platitudes as if they were divine truths newly revealed, exacting homage for his own part but paying back to his young devotee almost as much as he exacted—Frederick Branscombe, whose poetry and art had killed his wife and threatened to do the same by his daughter—was the present god

of Hortensia Lyon's devotion, the hero of her waking dreams and the idol of her imagination.

She was not what is meant by being in love with him; but she loved him. She never thought of him as a man by whose side she might one day stand in the equality of mutual love. He was only her ideal realized—the God-like poet at whose feet she knelt and whose favour was her highest honour. Had she been older things would have been different; but with such a girl as she was, her passionate enthusiasm was without the consciousness of self or the foreshadowing of danger. So far indeed from carrying with it any sentiment of peril, it seemed to her the pre-eminent glory of her life; and the proudest confession of her own worthiness was in the knowledge that she could understand and fitly reverence such surpassing worth as Mr. Branscombe's. In short she was in the romantic and devotional stage of her mental existence when she must have her fetish. She might have gone in for Ritualism or Methodism—she might have devoted herself to painting ivy-leaves and apple-blossoms, or to the interpretation of Wagner and the violin—she might have written a novel, a tragedy, or Sonnets to Despair, to the Moon, to Death and to Disappointment—she might have given her heart to her cousin Randolph Mackenzie as the apotheosis of the commonplace, or have dreamed out a hero for herself after the pattern of Byron's Corsair or Trelawney's Younger Son—she might have studied anatomy by the plates in her father's Encyclopedia—have made her favourite saint of Victoria Woodhull and her heroine of Vera Sassulitch—but she did none of these things. She simply put Stella's father, that elegant and superb Mr. Branscombe, on a pedestal in the sanctuary of her imagination and gave herself up to his worship as the highest to which she could attain.

Her cousin followed her eyes as they looked up into the sky, their gaze so full of enthusiastic devotion.

"No, Hortensia, he is not all that," he said again with sturdy honesty. "And between the two which is best—Mr. Branscombe, who has forced his daughter to make such a tremendous sacrifice, just to keep him company, or Stella, who had given up her lover for her father? You cannot make two words as to which is the most noble and unselfish! My only doubt is that Stella has gone over the line and done more than she need, or even ought."

"I do not compare them," answered Hortensia coldly.

"Mr. Branscombe has only demanded what is due to him as a father; and Stella has only done her duty as a daughter."

"And Cyril Ponsonby?" asked the fidus Achates reproachfully. "It seems to me that Cyril comes badly off among you all! No one thinks of him; and yet he has Stella's promise, and the engagement was sanctioned by both the father and mother before poor Mrs. Branscombe died."

"That makes all the difference," said Hortensia in her turn reproachfully. "Would you have such a man as Mr. Branscombe left quite alone, with no one to look after his comforts, no one to be his companion, no one to love him, or care for him? Randolph! I am shocked! If one has to suffer, of course it ought to be Cyril. In the first place he is younger, and can bear it better; and in the next place he is not half so splendid as Mr. Branscombe, and it does not signify whether he is happy or not. Certainly Stella should have given up Cyril for her father! She has done only her plain duty."

"I do not think so," said Randolph. "I think that having given her promise, she ought to have stuck to Cyril."

"I shall not talk to you any more," said Hortensia with dignity. "You are hopeless!"

She turned away with an offended air. Had he not scoffed at her god?—extinguished the fragrant incense burning before his shrine?—swept off the flowers with which she had garlanded the sacred image? He was then rightly ostracized and excommunicated, at least for the moment; as a faithful worshipper she would hold no friendly terms with him till her wrath had cooled.

"Now you are angry with me, Hortensia!" said her cousin, following at her heels and speaking with humility and sorrow, but not with the true penitence of one who acknowledges his wrong and goes back on his words.

"No, I am not angry, I am only hurt and disappointed," she answered stiffly. "I had hoped better things of you, Randolph."

"Better things than what?" he asked boyishly. "What have I said or done that is so bad as all that? I only take Cyril's part; which is but natural when you come to think of it."

"That does not make it right," said Hortensia. "To be natural is not always to be noble."

"I am sorry to have vexed you," he returned; "but I am

Cyril's friend, as you know; and if I do not stick to him, who ought?"

"You should prefer the truth even to friendship," was her lofty reply.

"I don't see any falsehood in what I have said," he answered hastily.

He was only a dense, good-hearted athlete, and not well up in moral philosophy of a refined kind.

She raised her small round shoulders with an impatient gesture.

"I did not say you told stories," she said contemptuously. "Truth does not mean only that. How can you be so *borné*, Randolph?"

"Oh, now you are going too far ahead of me," he said with frank bewilderment. "I do not follow you, Hortensia."

"I do not suppose you do," she answered, her foot on the door-step. "Mr. Branscombe would have understood me," she added, flinging her Parthian shaft as she took her way to her own room upstairs, where Randolph could not follow her.

So the bitter taste in his mouth was more bitter still, and the uneasiness that oppressed him was made still more onerous by this jarring conversation where every note had been discordant, and where his cousin's curious depreciation of himself had been in exact ratio with her exaggerated admiration of Mr. Branscombe. It was all very odd and very hard, he thought with a heavy sigh. Everything seemed to have got out of gear somehow, and he did not see how matters were to be put right—in chief part because he did not understand the secret springs by which they had gone wrong.

And what could he do for Cyril? The poor old fellow seemed to rely on him so much, and he had no more power than a cat to change the cross-current of events. He could not even see Stella, for he had no excuse to give for a second call so soon after the first; and since her mother's death she had never been outside the Lodge gates, save when she and her father went in the close carriage to return the formal visits of condolence and to church. And they did not even go to church every Sunday; and when they did they went in long before the service began, and stayed until every one had left, and the old sexton was beginning to lock up. So how could he see her? And yet how much he should like to talk

to her of Cyril and to do what he could to press the poor old fellow's claims. If only he could find an excuse for calling at Rose Hill!—if only he had a woman's fertile brain so that he could invent something out of nothing and give reasons where none existed!

And thinking all this, his desire grew too strong for fear or prudence; and he resolved to brave all the consequences, to break the ice of wisdom and propriety, and to call boldly at the house.

"What can that young man want?" asked Mr. Branscombe with marked displeasure when the servant brought in the news that Mr. Randolph Mackenzie was in the drawing-room. "I do not approve of these frequent visits from young men. In your position, my Stella, deprived of maternal care and guidance as you are, you cannot be too careful."

"He did not ask specially for me, dear papa," said Stella. "Most likely he asked for you."

But her heart beat fast, and she felt so far untrue in that she was very sure that Randolph had come to see her, because he was Cyril's friend and she was Cyril's lover.

"Oh! I have no time to bestow on a brainless young oaf like that," said Mr. Branscombe with impatient contempt. "If he has to be admitted at all you must do the honours. It is impossible for me to bring myself to his low level! Tell him I am engaged. It would be better indeed to tell him that we are both engaged and cannot receive him."

"Perhaps I had better see him for just a moment," said Stella, who had risen and made a few steps away from the table.

Her face was pale and eager. She pushed back her hair from her forehead—her poor mother's frequent gesture—and looked almost hysterically anxious and excited.

"He may have brought a message from Hortensia," she then added with unconscious and instinctive hypocrisy. It was the first thing that came into her mind, and she did not wait to ask herself whether she really believed her own suggestion or not—nor why she had put forward the pretty little Puritan as the most likely solvent of her father's will.

"Ah? So? In that case then go," said Mr. Branscombe graciously; "but do not be long, my child. Your time is too precious to be spent on such as Mr. Randolph Mackenzie," with a slight sneer—"employed too profitably here in this

little Temple of Sweetness and Light to be dissipated in the nothings of his crass conversation!"

"I will be back directly, papa," said Stella; and her father looked after her with genuine surprise at the strange quickness with which she made her exit—he could almost have called it her escape. It was scarcely like Stella—his Stella—to vanish in that abrupt way, as if leaving him were a pleasure and a relief.

"Youth is a great mistake," said the gentleman poet to himself. "The freshness of its skin and the beauty of its emotions are more than balanced by its frivolities and sefishness. The restless inability of this child of mine to sit still for half an hour together—the indifference which I am beginning to suspect she feels for my work in comparison with any mindless little diversion, such even as this young man's unintellectual conversation—both perplex and annoy me. Ah! my good Matilda was better broken-in than this!—and that precious pearl of maidenhood, that receptive, appreciative, loving little Hortensia would have been infinitely more sympathetic than I find my own child!"

Mr. Branscombe sighed as he thought this—sighed over the want of heart-whole devotion which, though not distinctly manifested, he was beginning to suspect in Stella, the daughter whose highest interests he thought he had consulted by taking her away from her lover and binding close to his own side.

Meanwhile the two young people had clasped hands in the drawing-room; and Randolph had opened at once on the real purport of his visit.

"I have had a letter from Cyril, to-day," he said abruptly.

She flushed, smiled, looked anxious, pleased, excited, earnest. Then the tears rushed into her eyes as she asked in a low voice:

"Yes? and what does he say?"

"Oh, he is so unhappy!" Randolph answered. "And you cannot wonder at it," he added. "It is rough on the poor old fellow; and the wonder is how he gets along at all."

"What can I do?" cried Stella in despair. "I cannot leave papa. He is so helpless alone, and has become so dependent on me since poor mamma went—I must not leave him."

"But are you never going to marry Cyril?" asked Cyril's friend, opening his large blue eyes.

"Yes, yes! some day," she answered hurriedly.

"Some day?—that is rather vague. Some day?—but when?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know," she said hopelessly.

"He will go to India, and then he will not be back in England for years and years," said Randolph.

The tears came again into her eyes. He felt like an executioner and a brute for giving her so much distress. He would like to have sworn at himself, given himself a knock or a cut somewhere for self-revenge at his brutality; but he was the agent of another; he was not quite responsible; and he must do his duty by Cyril though he did make Stella suffer.

"If I left papa and harm came of it I should feel his murderer," she said. "And he is so sensitive and easily wounded! I should never know a day's peace if I left him."

"And poor Cyril? You do not think of him?" said Randolph.

"He knows that I love him better than my life—better than anything in the world but my duty. I tell him so in every letter I write," she said, clasping her white hands nervously in each other. "Cyril knows that I do love him! Tell him so—tell him that you know that I do!" she added, looking up into Randolph's face as if he held the destinies of the world in his hands, because he had been made the clumsy, broad-shouldered Mercury for the occasion, trusted with the precious burden of Cyril's love for her and now having to carry back the weight of hers to him.

"I will," said Randolph in a low voice.

How strange it was to him to be thus trusted by her—made her confidant and messenger—and yet how delighful! He had never in his life felt so honoured as now when Stella Branscombe looked up into his face and sent her love by him to Cyril Ponsonby! What a divine creature she was!—how sweet and gracious, how noble and beautiful, how perfect all through—mind and person, character and face alike! Poor Cyril!—no, not poor Cyril—enviable, blessed rather to be the beloved of such a radiant Star as this!

"Is he coming down soon?" then asked Randolph after a pause. "He seems to speak of it in his letter to me."

"I tell him he had better not," answered Stella with a hopeless look and accent.

"Surely yes! You will not let him go to India and not see you before he goes?" asked Randolph hastily.

"I want to see him, oh, more than I can say!" she answered; "but papa was against it when I spoke to him the other day, and said that Cyril must wait. He could not bear to see him just yet; and I could understand that. Poor papa!"

"Oh, that was the reason, then, of this letter to me to-day. Now I can understand it," said Randolph a little bitterly. "'Pon my soul, it is rough on him," he added.

"But if papa objects I cannot help myself," said Stella.

"You owe something to Cyril—surely you owe something to a fellow now you are engaged to him!" pleaded Randolph.

"I know I do; but if papa will not let him come, what can I possibly do?" pleaded in her turn Stella.

"Stick up for your rights," said Cyril's friend.

Again she shook her head.

"It would be impossible against papa's wish and command," she answered. "Girls are not like boys—we must obey our parents; you need not always, if you do not like."

But Randolph would not allow that.

"Girls have as much right to stick up as men," he said; "and you should not be forced into what you think wrong or do not like."

The conversation turning always round this central point, lasted longer time than Stella knew or had intended. She woke to the fact of the hour with a kind of guilty start; sent Randolph away hurriedly; and went back to her father in his studio, having only made her eyes red, her head ache, her heart more sore than it had been already; and having come no nearer than before to a satisfactory solution of her life's great problem—how to content both Cyril and her father, and how to make each happy at the same time.

"What a terribly long time you have been!" said Mr. Branscombe peevishly, as she entered. "And my work, neglected all these hours—stopping for want of you!"

"I am so sorry, dear papa. I do not know how the time went so fast!" she said ingenuously.

"And what message did he bring from your little friend, Hortensia?" asked that young maiden's elderly idol, stopping in his work of stippling up a piece of painting supposed to represent Mr. Lyon's pretty and somewhat wrong-headed little daughter.

Stella started. It was not often that she felt the guilty thing, self-convicted, she felt now; but truth to say she had forgotten Hortensia as if she had never existed, and during the whole of that long hour's interview her name had not once been mentioned.

"He did not bring me any," she answered, lowering her eyes.

"Then I may venture to ask of what you have been talking —you and this brainless young man, for a good hour by the clock?" asked her father satirically.

"Cyril," answered Stella simply.

"My dear," said Mr. Branscombe, turning round from his easel and speaking angrily; "that Cyril Ponsonby of yours is becoming a confounded nuisance, and you will have to give him his congé if he intrudes himself thus in all our sacred moments."

"Papa!" she said, looking at him with a white and frightened face.

"If he does not know how to respect your present painful position—if he fails to understand your duties—he must be made," continued Mr. Branscombe, still irate.

"What has he done? Oh, papa! do not speak like that! Cyril has done nothing to vex you. He has been dutiful and patient," said Stella with a sob.

"Be calm, Stella—be calm and reasonable," returned her father. "It argues a lower mental development than I care to see in my child that she should have given her fancy—I can scarcely call it by the sacred name of love—to one so utterly destitute of the higher culture as this young Cyril Ponsonby. And do not cry. Tears spoil a woman's face, and yours in especial. You have not the complexion that supports tears. Besides they are barbarous expressions of feeling, of which the truly civilized ought to be ashamed. Do your duty; trust in Providence; and come to your father's arms!" he added, laying down his palette and brush and opening his arms with half majestic, half paternal tenderness.

"Papa! dear, dear papa! Do not break my heart!" said Stella, burying her face in his bosom and disregarding his injunction by weeping passionately.

"My child! do not you break mine!" he answered gravely, with a tremor in his voice that was one of his most effective bits of histrionic furniture.

And between these two terrible fires of love and duty—

these two irreconcilable attachments, each of which was as dear to her as her very life—the poor girl stood as the victim of fate—the Andromeda of sacrifice whom no Persius could deliver.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BY THE LOGIC OF APPEARANCES.

A COMMISSION from Mr. Branscombe was no sinecure. Like all well-born amateurs he despised "professionals," while profiting by their technical ability, and maintained that the general refinement belonging to a cultivated gentleman gave more real insight than the mere mechanical ability of man who had learned only that one thing. He was an admirer of what Americans call an all-round man; and he was himself, to his own mind, emphatically that man. Consequently, thinking that he knew better in all things—save how to manipulate the materials—than the artist whom he had employed, and though the work was already in the stone-cutter's hands, he worried Sandro Kemp over this monument to his good Matilda, as Mrs. Prinsep's unfortunate lodger had never been worried before; sending for him at all unearthly and inconvenient times to come up to Rose Hill that this point might be considered, that new idea ventilated, such and such an alteration made and such and such an improvement added.

"Sandro Kemp is all very well as a skilled artizan," he said to Stella with his finest air; "but he is only a poor creature when you come to creative imagination. He wants the application of the divine fire to be made anything of. It is singular how difficult it is to find a man with any real genius," he added. "How soulless and dead all these professional fellows are! Compared to men of real artistic feeling, of real æsthetic refinement, they are merely hodmen of a superior kind—bricklayers and carpenters who have learned the use of their tools and can turn out work more or less mechanically correct. But when you come to genius, then," said Mr. Branscombe, lightly laying his white fingers on his somewhat narrow and certainly shallow breast, "you must have the gentleman, not the professional!"

And Stella believed her dear papa implicitly. Nevertheless, hearing as she did all that went on, she could not quite shut her ears or blind her eyes to the fact that after all it

was really Sandro who had the better taste and the superior judgment—Sandro who negatived and Sandro who proposed—and that her beloved and elegant father's ideas were gently but inexorably set aside and shown to be impossible, impracticable and inadmissible. She was half inclined to quarrel with the artist for his tenacity and presumption; only that she could not deny what was so patent—the better treatment of her dear mother's monument in his hands.

And thus again, between the living and the dead, was in her mind the same kind of distracted loyalty as that which existed between her father and her lover; and she found the full, free devotion to that sublime parental Apollo hedged round with strange difficulties and wicked little thorns of mental opposition. But the habits of a life are hard to change and the religion of youth clings close. The worship of her father, inculcated from her earliest days, was as the marrow of her bones, the very blood of her heart; and it would take more than the evidence of false artistic taste to warp her loving nature from its early loyalty or substitute for her present fond belief the colder judgment of criticism and doubt.

One day however, when Sandro had been up to Rose Hill as usual, and had also as usual been obliged to prove the infallible amateur all wrong and grossly ignorant of the first principles of that art whereof he professed to be a master, he met Stella's eyes fixed on him with a strange expression of mingled surprise and fear. It was one of those looks which reveal more than the person is conscious of feeling; like the first automatic movements of a sleeper beginning to awake. It was the flash of a moment—the first stirring of the sleeping perception; but Sandro, who could read the human face as other men read books—save when his eyes were blinded by his heart—understood the significance and foreshadowing of that strange expression and thought to himself that he must be more careful, more discreet for the future, and manage somehow to unite with greater delicacy his own self-respect as an artist with kindly regard for her filial superstition. Which was about the most difficult thing in the world when dealing with Mr. Branscombe on any matter whatever in the presence of his daughter.

Sandro saw too, how ill and changed she was; and this was another inducement to him to be tender of that maddening old humbug, as he mentally called the Finery Fred of forty years ago, for her poor dear sake if in no wise for his own.

That look of latent terror at what was before her to discover and the signs of her failing health still haunting him, Sandro, coming along the road, saw at a little distance Augusta Latrobe walking in her quiet leisurely way, taking her boy for his afternoon run. The two had not met since the famous picnic, now some weeks old; and Sandro fancied that he had been nursing his jealousy and disappointment into a very good beginning of indifference, and that really the fair-faced widow was no more to him than any other pretty woman who looked well in a picture, and was pleasant to talk to because soft in voice and reasonable in thought. He scarcely expected his heart to beat as it did when he turned the corner and saw her handsome figure coming to meet him with that undulating grace for which she was famous. He was vexed that his blood should dash through his veins at this headlong speed—for which however the weather alone was answerable. It happened to be a chilly and unpleasant day, but our variable old atmosphere is the general scapegoat all round, and blow hot blow cold is ever in fault.

As soon as Augusta saw who it was in the light brown suit that was striding between the hedgerows, she drew her veil over her face; and, Sandro being in that state compared to which the porcupine is ideal smoothness, winced at the action. It never entered into his head, which the wound in his heart made abnormally dense, that it was to put up a screen against self-betrayal. It was a screen sure enough, but against him not herself. And it checked the impulse which else he might have had, to tell her all about himself and his two grand commissions and how at last the door seemed opening which was to lead him into the great temple of fame and the treasure-house of wealth. No; she cared nothing for him, he thought bitterly. Why should he oppress her with his confidence, and claim for his good fortune that sympathy which she had evidently denied to his bad? No; let himself and all that made his life—all the facts of his career and all the feelings of his soul—be obliterated. He was nothing to her. Why then waste his strength in trying to waken the dead?—to make the deaf hear and the dumb speak?

If he had put his sensations into words, this would have been the form they would have taken, as he rapidly narrowed the distance which lay between him and Augusta, till he came close to her and could see her sweet face even through

that insulting screen of gauze. For half an instant he intended only to bow and pass on. It would be more dignified and more manly. But something stronger than his pride held his feet, and he stopped almost against his will, and held out his hand.

The boy ran up to him full of a child's caressing pleasure when he hails one who is always kind and pleasant and is therefore beloved; one associated in his little mind with now a top and now a ball, sometimes a picture and once a grand treat which he should never forget—a whole boxful of chocolates! The widow's colour mounted to her cheeks in that pretty pale pink blush which was so becoming, yet which betrayed so little conscious confusion; and then the two clasped hands, and Sandro's good imitation of indifference fell to pieces like a broken marionette.

He loved her. Yes; he loved her. His love was hopeless and not returned; that he knew now if once he had thought somewhat differently; still, he loved her, and he should love her for the whole of his life. But what hope was there for him in that quiet manner, that calm voice, those clear and steadfast eyes which neither wavered nor fell, neither darkened nor softened?—eyes which looked at him as steadily as a child's, and yet not quite full into his. His indifference was only feigned,—but hers—hers was real.

Flung off from his own concerns Sandro, half in earnest about Stella, half to make some kind of relation, however shadowy, with Augusta, told her how ill the girl was looking and asked her boldly to go to Rose Hill and see her. She would be sure to do the poor thing good, he added with more meaning in his words than he cared to show. If she would talk to her and be kind and sympathetic, she could do her so much good!

This function of talking to people and doing them good was one of Augusta Latrobe's offices, assigned to her by universal belief and consent. She was a woman in whose beneficent influence every one who knew her had unbounded confidence. She was assumed to have an almost magnetic power over the minds of others; and "Get Mrs. Latrobe to talk to her" or "him" was a formula in common use at Highwood when there was a recalcitrant or a hot-headed member of the community whom others wished to bring into the way of reason and conformity. So now Sandro said to her, according to the popular temper and belief: "I have

just come from Rose Hill, where I wish you would go and talk to poor Miss Branscombe!"

"You are often at Rose Hill now," said Augusta, letting the request lie while she took up only the statement.

"Yes; that eternal monument will never be at an end until it is finally put up; and perhaps not then," he answered.

"I heard you had undertaken poor darling Mrs. Branscombe's monument," she returned.

"Who told you?" he asked smiling.

"Colonel Moneypenny," she answered, with admirable self-possession and blameless cruelty.

"I do not know that it was any business of his," said Sandro quickly, his eyes very dark and his face very pale.

"In a small place like this everything is every one's business," she answered. "At all events every one knows that you have this monument to do."

"I wanted to tell you myself," he said, forgetting the resolution of his offended dignity.

"That I might congratulate or condole?" she answered lightly. "I am glad that you have an opportunity of showing us what you can do; but I should think to work with or for Mr. Branscombe would take all the gilt off the ginger-bread—if it were an inch thick!"

"Yes it does," he answered; "and the pleasure is dearly bought. But I want to speak to you of poor Miss Branscombe. I wish you would go up and see her," he repeated.

"Why?" she returned, looking up with a half-sad, half-amused smile.

"Because if you would talk to her you would do her good," he said.

The smile brightened into a laugh.

"Every one comes to me to talk to people," she said. "What do you want me to say?"

"I do not know," he answered simply. "If I did perhaps I should have said it myself. But she is looking distressingly ill, and she is manifestly out of spirits altogether. I think her father keeps her too close and that she wants more change, more companionship, more fresh air—in short, rousing out of herself, poor thing."

"That is a case for Dr. Quigley, not for me," said Augusta, as the doctor's high gig and fast trotter rounded the corner and came at a swift pace towards them.

"Confound the fellow!" muttered Sandro, who wished the

doctor and his machine at the bottom of the Red Sea; but he put on the hypocritical smile of conventional welcome, and said nothing about the fate of Pharaoh and his hosts, as he gave the doctor "Good-day."

"Dr. Quigley, Mr. Kemp has something to say to you," said Augusta quite gravely, as the doctor stopped his horse and looked at the two, keenly, searchingly, as he had looked at them on the day of the picnic when they were all assembled at Crossing's Bridge.

"Say? what?" he asked.

"Only that I think Miss Branscombe is looking ill, and that her father keeps her too much shut up in that stifling room he calls his studio," said Sandro Kemp, he too speaking with the most praiseworthy gravity, and as if Stella's health were really the only thing that lay between the widow and himself—the only chord that vibrated in unison.

"And I am to interfere?" asked Dr. Quigley.

"Yes," both answered together.

"My dear people," he returned with energy; "are you living in Arcadia? The man who would not take care of his wife with heart-disease is not likely to look after his daughter without. The only chance is that Stella Branscombe should understand her true position and her father's illimitable selfishness—and then break her heart at the discovery. If ever she comes to know what he is, and takes action on her knowledge, she will die under the self-reproach of a parricide. When the conscience is included in upholding a sham, and sacrificing the truth for a living lie has all the force and meaning of virtue, you cannot do anything. Stella Branscombe is a martyr to filial love, and her father is a parental sham; but she must fight it out by herself."

"But it is pitiable to see her!" said Sandro warmly.

"Things might be worse if she were enlightened," said the doctor. "I question if she would live through the discovery. Take my advice, both of you;—do not mix yourself up in this matter. No outsider interfering, even with the best motives, in family matters, does good or escapes personal damage. Why burn your fingers when there are no chestnuts to pick out for yourself or for others? I will keep an eye on the poor young lady, and put in my word when I see her really in danger; but until then remonstrance would only irritate Mr. Branscombe and make matters worse. Good day; take care of yourselves," he added significantly as he

drove off; leaving a certain uneasy doubt in Augusta's mind as to what was really meant by taking care of themselves. But she supposed it was only because of her desire to "talk to" Stella Branscombe. It could not be anything else.

"I think Dr. Quigley is right," she said with false equanimity, as he drove away. "I do not mind speaking to Stella, or to any one, if I think I can be of use; and I am no more afraid of Mr. Branscombe, for all his fine airs and superiority, than I am of one of those sheep in the field. But I do not think I can do any good. Stella has taken her part; and, as Dr. Quigley says, she must fight it out by herself."

"I should have been glad if you had followed my suggestion," said the artist with a sore manner.

She looked him full in the face.

"Are you too, one of the men who would rather be personally pleased by obedience than know that opposition had been the more reasonable action?" she asked gravely. "I had thought not. If you are one of those people I would rather not be enlightened."

"You are the one perfect woman in the world!" he said warmly.

She laughed and turned away, looking at her boy.

"No," she answered after a short pause; "I am only reasonable."

Nevertheless she determined in her own mind that she would go and see Stella Branscombe to-morrow; only what good she was to do when she had gone, was of all questions the most unanswerable.

She held out her hand in sign of leave-taking. He took it and kept it.

"I know you will be glad to hear that I have received my order," he then said gazing into her face. "I am to have Mr. Woodley's mansion, and I have finished my designs for the Lingstone Cathedral. I think they come well enough to bear competition; and I am not afraid of the future."

"I am very glad," she answered, imprudently letting her hand lie in his for congratulation.

It was a most unpardonable piece of folly in so reasonable a woman; but human nature is weak and foolish even at the best, and has a trick of leaving the little postern gate open after it has carefully shut close the great main entrance. For not only did that soft submission to the more impulsive

action of the artist rouse thoughts and awaken hopes which had better be left dormant, but it put the pretty widow into a false position with others as well, and gave a handle for thoughtlessness, if not ill-nature, to turn the grindstone against her.

To Gip and Pip, coming streaming along the road, the sight of those two standing there, hand in hand, looking into each other's eyes, was too sweet a nut to be left uncracked. The discovery of "spoons" was a true godsend to them, and they were sure to make the world a generous present of all they lighted on in the way of erotic treasures. As destitute of delicacy as of spite, they never thought they could do harm by their œcumenical confidence. If they had they would have shut those wide-open mouths of theirs, and kept the secret religiously. But as they did not mind how much they themselves were chaffed they supposed every one else must be as thick-skinned and insensitive; and thus, the suspicion of the Doves that anything was on hand, came to be a kind of nightmare to hesitating, shy, undeclared, or as in this case unwilling, lovers. Nevertheless, the thing had come; and Gip and Pip, the most good-natured, inconsiderate, and innocent mischief-makers in Highwood, had found the penniless widow and impecunious artist standing in the high-road hand in hand, and looking—"Oh!" said Gip; "looking spoons as big as tureens at each other!"

And let old Mrs. Morshead but once get hold of that idea, and then where would be poor Augusta's peace of mind and security of tenure! The widow was equal to the occasion, however, as she generally was; and as the twins came up she repeated in a clear, ringing voice:

"I am indeed glad, Mr. Kemp, and congratulate you!"

"On what?" shouted the Doves, full of wicked laughter and radiant detection.

"Ah, what!" said Mrs. Latrobe, also laughing in the most natural way in the world. "You must ask Mr. Kemp himself. He has just done me the honour to make me his confidante on a most important matter; but I must not pass it on. If he likes to include you, well and good; but you see I am bound to secrecy!"

"What is it, Mr. Kemp?" asked Gip and Pip together. "Are you going to be married? Are you? If you are, oh! do tell us who it is. Any one here? It must be some one here! Who is it, Augusta? I am sure you know!"

with more wickedness of laughter, more radiance of detection.

"Well, no, I can answer so much," said Augusta, her gaiety of humour still matching theirs. "It is not to any one here. But I must leave you to find it all out by yourselves. Good-bye, girls. Good-bye, Mr. Kemp, and be quite sure I will never tell!"

On which she went off still laughing, leaving Sandro Kemp struck dumb with amazement. His man's slower brain had not discerned the danger which had been palpable at the first flash to her; and, not understanding the peril, he did not understand the way of escape. He was bewildered. All this laughter and phantasmagoric mystery made him feel as if suddenly surrounded by a crowd of mocking elves who took his senses clean away and made the things which had hitherto been clear and solid appear vague and visionary. What did it all mean? Why did they all laugh? and at what were they all hinting? Married? Confidence? Secrets? It was a puzzle from first to last, and he could see nothing better for it than to follow blindly the bewildering lead that had been given him, and shake his head knowingly as he laughed without sense or meaning, and answered in the air:

"Ah, what? Wait till I tell you! I will some day."

On which he dashed off on his way, as if escaping from pursuers; and Gip and Pip ran after Augusta and besieged her with questions for a full half-hour by the church clock. But they got nothing out of her save vague suggestions which only served to make their mad guesses surer. Either it was an engagement to some one not at Highwood, of which the secret had been confided to Augusta, or—was it, could it be, Augusta herself? For what else could they make of that attitude, those looks on the broad highway, and the "spoons as big as tureens" exchanged between the two?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CRITIC OF PURE REASON.

Our true masters are our servants. From the dark background of the kitchen they rule the house, dictate our actions and set the lines of our public repute; we, all the while, thinking that we rule them while they govern us. And the Rose Hill servants were no exception to the rule. Jones had

given it as his opinion that Miss Stella was kept far too close by her pa'; and the servants' hall had agreed with him that it would be good for her to see more company and be brightened up a bit. Wherefore, in spite of the standing order that "Mr. and Miss Branscombe were not at home" when intrusive visitors chose to call, the day after this odd misleading interview on the high-road, he let in Augusta Latrobe, and took the chance of a wigging from his old master, as he said, for the sake of doing a good turn by his young mistress.

"Mrs. Latrobe? I cannot see her! Tell her I am indisposed—engaged—out—anything you like; but I cannot see her!" said Mr. Branscombe peevishly. "How often must I repeat it, Jones, I am not at home to any one excepting on business, or where I myself give leave?"

"Mrs. Latrobe seemed very earnest, sir, to see Miss Branscombe," said the man with respectful pertinacity. "She would not take a refusal."

"Then she should have been made," said Mr. Branscombe crossly; but Stella, with something of her mother's weary look added to her own more excited nervousness, said quickly:

"Poor Augusta! I should like to see her, dear papa, if you do not mind. I have not seen her for such a long time now; and she was such a favourite with poor mamma!"

"Your dear mother made a great many undesirable favourites," said Mr. Branscombe significantly. "However, if you wish it, I will spare you for a little while; and—stay, I myself will go with you," he added with an indescribable air of condescension. "As you say, Mrs. Latrobe was a favourite with your poor mother, and I shall pay respect to her memory by conquering my own dislike and receiving her friend with courtesy and distinction. Jones, tell Mrs. Latrobe that Miss Branscombe and I will join her immediately."

What a wicked girl she was growing! thought Stella to herself. Why did she feel that strange sense of cheek and chillness when her dear father said that he also would see Mrs. Latrobe? Why should she not be as glad now as she would have been in former days? Poor papa! He had doomed himself as well as her to this close, shut-up, solitary and eminently mournful life. It was as good, then, for him as for her, to have a break; and she was abominably wicked to wish that he had kept away. Nevertheless she did, with

a distinct if momentary consciousness that overwhelmed her first with disappointment and then with a feeling of sin and shame. She went up to her father and took his arm with a gesture that looked like spontaneity of love; in fact, it was unspoken contrition.

"Dear papa!" she said fondly.

"There, there, that will do, Stella!" he answered impatiently. She disturbed his thoughts and broke through the rhythm of his movements; and Mr. Branscombe liked to have his love, like everything else, served up at the very right moment and in just the manner and amount congenial to him at the time. "You must not allow your affection, my dear, to become exigeante and ennuyante!" he said; "or to tread on the limits of graver subjects."

To which she answered humbly: "No, papa;" but she felt wounded now as well as wicked and repentant.

"It will gratify her if I give her an early copy of this," then said Mr. Branscombe, taking one from a pile of quarto-sized black-bordered and hot-pressed cards which had come in from the printers' this morning.

It was his Threnody, printed in silver lettering, to be distributed among his friends. Photographs of himself and his good Matilda headed the double columns into which the poem was divided; and in the middle, above the title, was a confused jumble of mortuary symbols printed in flat deep black. The contrast of black and white gave the card a curiously piebald appearance; but Mr. Branscombe thought the mixture effective, and the sentiment which united saintly beatitude with earthly mourning one of supreme poetic excellence.

This was the pleasure, the dissipation and the vanity of his later years. His old place as Beauty-man and Finery Fred—his old character of lady-killer—had dropped from him by the force of circumstances, but not his ambition to be Somebody in his society. He had elected to be that Somebody in the field of æsthetics where no one in Highwood could touch him—not even, in his own estimation, Sandro Kemp, the professional artist. And the exquisite delight to him of printing in a luxurious form his poetry and his music, and then distributing copies to all in the place, was almost as great as had been formerly that of picking up another and yet another little heart found fluttering at his feet, and adding one more to the secret list—he had it yet—of confessed victims to his irresistible charms.

"She will be flattered and gratified," he repeated, carefully choosing a copy where his own photograph pleased him; and Stella answered in all good faith: "Yes." And yet—why did she sigh as she spoke?

As the two came into the drawing-room together, Augusta felt exactly the same sense of disappointment and chill that Stella had felt before her; without adding to it the poor girl's shame for sin.

"What a dreadful creature he is!" she thought, as the scented, well-curled, melancholy and elegant widower came slowly forward, evidencing the grace of refined gentlehood and the force of grief in equal proportions.

"What an affected old horror!" she thought again, smiling with the forced hypocrisy of society as she returned the greeting which he made with stately courtesy.

He was not what he would have called "fond of" Augusta Latrobe. Her critical judgment and unenthusiastic reasonableness annoyed him; but even when he was not fond of people he was never less than elegant. He liked to feel sure that when they went away, though they might say he had been distant, they must confess he had been superior.

"Here is a little thing I threw off the other day," he said, handing her the card. "I have brought you the first copy, Mrs. Latrobe, knowing the reverent affection that you had for my poor wife and her kindly interest in you. The sacredness of the subject and the tenderness of the feeling with which it has been composed will condone its shortcomings," he added with mock humility; shortcomings in his work being like the squaring of the circle or the discovery of perpetual motion.

Augusta received the card with tranquil politeness, but without warmth or enthusiasm. She did not, as he hoped she would, run over the poetry with that greedy kind of haste which predestines admiration, nor did she even look at his photograph. She turned to that of Mrs. Branscombe, and tears stole between her eyelids as she looked.

"Thank you, Mr. Branscombe," she said gently. "How like her! Sweet darling! how like it is!"

And this was her sole word of commendation to the poet.

When he had shown the proofs to Hortensia she had wept over his noble lines; and especially had that touching couplet which led off the rest—

> Sweet spirit, calling softly from the tomb
> Where death has laid thee in Cimmerian gloom—

seemed to her the soul of all that was majestic, eloquent and tender. But Mrs. Latrobe, scarcely glancing at the silvered page, said nothing more than: "Thank you," and concentrated her attention on her dead friend's photograph which evidently interested her infinitely more than did his living lines.

Mr. Branscombe could not choose but mark the difference between these first two recipients of his poem. How much the balance of good taste, good feeling, appreciation and poetic insight went to the side of his pretty little Puritan devotee!—and how strongly confirmed was his own impression that his good Matilda had had the habit of making very undesirable favourites indeed!

But it was not in flesh and blood—at least not in Mr. Branscombe's flesh and blood—to remain content with such short measure. For what reward did he work, live laborious days and sleepless nights, he said, but for the praise of his fellowmen? He was not ashamed to confess his ambition. That last infirmity of noble minds was no spot on the face of his spiritual sun. For if he had the one he surely had the other. His ambition pre-supposed his nobility, and he was quite content to confess the one if credited with the other. He was intensely disgusted with Mrs. Latrobe. Her want of appreciation was a mark of intellectual crassitude, which by rights should have debarred her for the future from the privilege of his society. He would have refused to continue an acquaintance with one who had eaten pease with his knife; and surely this was even worse taste and the mark of a still lower condition! Nevertheless, he could not be at ease until he had forced from her politeness that acknowledgment of his genius which she would not give by the generosity of her judgment. Going over to her as she sat on the ottoman, holding the card in her hand and still lovingly examining the sweet face of her dead friend, he sat down in the division next to hers. Leaning over her shoulder with a confidential as well as patronizing air, he said:

"Allow me to read to you my little tribute to her dear memory, Mrs. Latrobe. An author knows his work better than any one else; and the first rendering of a poem sets the measure and gives the sense in perpetuity. The poet alone can render his lines in that perfection which ensures complete understanding. Allow me."

He took the card from her hand and placed himself in his

bardic attitude—his hands well displayed, his head well up, his small feet, which the large bow in his shoes made still more delicate, in a graceful position, the fingers of his left hand laid lightly on his chest. And when he had arranged his person according to rule, he opened the wearisome fusillade of his recitation, and mouthed through his Threnody in the manner of a fifth-rate actor playing Hamlet in a barn.

When he had finished, he sighed deeply and handed back the card. Augusta took it with a faint inclination of her head and a wholly unintelligible murmur that might mean anything or nothing.

"How do you think they go?" asked Mr. Branscombe after a moment's pause. "Well?"

"Very smoothly," answered Augusta.

She could say so much in truth; for, in reading, all the redundant feet were cleverly jumped over and all the gaps were as cleverly filled in by newly-created syllables, so that the measure flowed with tolerable ease and the actual dislocations were not noticeable.

Mr. Branscombe smiled.

"I am glad you like it," he said. "I own I do also. I consider it the most satisfactory thing I have ever done; and an author is the best judge of his own work. I think these lines are fine," he continued, pointing out a passage; "and these again," indicating another. "This image is bold, is it not?" he next asked, repeating a phrase which contained two false quantities and nineteen words of absolute nonsense; "and this metaphor reads well?" he said again, half chanting a certain couplet, then pausing for her reply.

But now, when Augusta came full front with a fact which she had either to praise or to blame, she could not do such violence to her critical judgment as to endorse it. Had Mr. Branscombe been content with generalities she would have followed his lead and would have slid lightly over the dangerous places; but when he asked her direct approbation of a passage which said how the laughing hour that struck at this sweet spirit's birth had now run down and lost itself in the great sea of eternity, she took her stand and entered her demurrer.

"I think it wants a little clearness," she answered.

"So? and where? The Hours which dance around Aurora's car—the home domestic clock—the sands of time—the tide

of life—these are the ideas contained in the image," he returned.

"Yes, but the classic Hour did not strike, and a clock does not run down into the sea," she said quite gravely.

"There would be no poetry at all, my dear Mrs. Latrobe, if we poets were confined by the dull cords of prosaic fact," he said, amiably condescending to her ignorance and what he mentally called her earth-worminess. "All true poetry encloses as much as it embodies. You must read between the lines and find for yourself the statue within the marble. The value of the image is its comprehensiveness, its subtlety of suggestiveness, its combination of ideas, the facetted quality of its reflectivity. Guido's Aurora and the grave diction of modern ethics—where could you meet with a more prolific combination, a more precious embalmment of diversified thought?"

"I dare say not," said Augusta the earthworm; "still I think it wants a little clearing and bringing out."

"Now that I have explained it?" he asked.

"I see your meaning of course," she answered reluctantly.

Even this admission tried her.

"And, seeing, you justify?"

She laughed. "I am so stupid in things of this kind!" she said. "My opinion is worthless."

"No, pardon me, lady, not in the least so," he returned. "Molière's servant-maid stands as a sign to all of us, creative geniuses. What we write we naturally wish to be understood by the world at large, else we labour in vain. Herewith I except, of course, that audience, fit though few, which is the consecrated interpreter of our esoteric meaning. But the verdict of that intelligence which represents the majority is useful to us as a guide and gauge. I am therefore glad to hear your objections. They represent to us the non-conducting power of the larger half of the brain-world, and by them I can feel the pulse of the general intellect more clearly."

"I am your foolometer?" She laughed again, her bright eyes twinkling.

He bent his handsome head with elaborate grace.

"I did not say so," he returned gravely.

During all this time Stella had not spoken. She was sitting on the other side of Augusta Latrobe, looking alternately at her father and his critic, but taking no part in the discussion. She greatly wondered at Augusta's boldness,

and ardently wished that she would close her mouth, or open it only to praise and speak poor dear papa fair. And she ardently wished too, that she could get a word alone with her mother's favourite, her own dear friend albeit an earth-worm on the lower levels; though what she had to say in confidence that her father might not hear, she would have been hard put to it to tell. Floating thoughts of her mother, of Cyril, of freer breathing, of some change of subject, came and went like shadows through her mind; but if it was not to be, it was not, she said to herself with a sigh. Yet how much she should have enjoyed a long, sweet, quiet talk on everything, or on nothing, with the sense of mental freedom and personal sympathy in her kind companion!

Taking advantage of this slight change of front from his work to herself, Augusta turned rather abruptly to Stella. Like every one else she saw how changed the poor girl was. No longer the serenely bright, untroubled Star of olden days, she was now careworn and anxious, with the watchful eyes of a person either too heavily taxed or ever in fear; and her face had a fevered look that made her beauty melancholy to contemplate because so dangerously brightened by inward excitement.

"Are you well, dear Stella?" asked the widow abruptly, laying her hand on hers and feeling the fever through her gloves.

"I? Oh, yes, quite!" said Stella with that hysterical little laugh which so pitifully belies itself.

"You do not look so; and how hot your hand is!" said Augusta. "What have you been doing all the day?"

"I have been with papa in the studio," answered the girl.

"Not out, this lovely day?"

Stella glanced at her father.

"No, not yet," she answered.

"What have you been doing, dearie, that has kept you so busy?" asked Augusta, still inquisitorial.

"I have been copying music," said Stella.

She did not add, as she might: "And I have been called off this, the ostensible work of the day, at least once in every ten minutes, to examine the new touches on this square inch of painting, to hear the sonorous consonance of these two jingling rhymes, to give my criticism which means praise here, to add my opinion which means concurrence there. I have not been left even to my dull mechanical occupation in

peace; but I have been mentally tormented as much as absorbed—absorbed as so much food, so much electricity is absorbed by something which can do no good, however much it may be bolstered up, and which simply beggars and exhausts that by which it is supplied."

This was the real reason why "work" for Mr. Branscombe was so profoundly destructive to his associate. It was this perpetual drain, this incessant going out, coupled with unrest, which had killed that good Matilda and which was now wasting and fevering Stella.

"But copying music from morning till night will kill you, child!" said the widow with friendly haste. "You ought to change your occupation more than that. Have you read your week's books yet?"

This meant the books of the Reading Society to which all Highwood belonged.

"No," said Stella.

"You naughty girl! and they were so interesting! I hope that you have copied that pretty crewel pattern in the *Lady's Newspaper?* we are all doing it," said the widow.

"No; I have not had time," answered Stella.

"Stella! you idle child! What have you been doing?"

"Working for papa," said Stella.

The widow gave a little impatient movement with her pretty shoulders.

"Well, but working for papa cannot mean everything and all day long," she said, laughing to hide her vexation. "I see what it is, I shall have to come and look after you! I cannot have you grow idle. And one thing certainly that you ought to do is to go and take a nice long walk. It is a sin to stay in the house such a day as this. Come with Tony and me. The little scamp jumped into a puddle and made himself too disreputable for your drawing-room, so I left him at the Lodge. But come with us, like a dear. It will do you good."

"I do not know that papa can spare me," said Stella in a hesitating way, the colour coming into her face.

Mr. Branscombe was still sitting in his bardic attitude, chasing a poetic image round about the corners of the ceiling, and as if absorbed in thought. He started at this last mention of his name, and brought his eyes down from the ceiling to his daughter.

"Yes, my dear? You spoke? Pardon me, I did not hear

what you said;" he exclaimed as if newly awakened and a little confused, but always courteous and graceful.

"I want Stella to go out for a walk—to come with me and Tony," Augusta answered instead of the girl. "She is looking so pale, and as if she wanted a little change and fresh air. You can spare her, cannot you, Mr. Branscombe? She is afraid that you cannot, poor dear!"

"I can spare her, of course! My desire could not possibly stand in the way of hers," said Mr. Branscombe with fine paternal chivalrousness of feeling. "It is not a question of myself, but of her own feelings. In her deep mourning would she care to be seen outside the sacred precincts of home?"

"If you think it unbecoming, papa, of course not," said Stella.

"Your own heart must decide that question, my love," he answered. "Observance is valueless when not spontaneously offered. Enforced tribute is dross."

"But, Mr. Branscombe, a little walk can do no harm!" said Augusta, rather too warmly for prudence. "If you do not like Stella to be seen on the roads we will go by the fields where we shall not meet a creature. She really ought to go out! Even a drive in a close carriage would be better than nothing; but a good brisk walk would be the best of all."

"If you have the heart to go with Mrs. Latrobe and take a good, brisk, happy walk, go by all means, my love," said her father, answering Augusta through Stella. "Your dear mother's sainted spirit looking down on you will forgive the perhaps natural exuberance of youth—its perhaps natural demand for recreation, even at the most solemn seasons."

"But, Mr. Branscombe," again remonstrated Augusta; "a little walk in the fields—that is not like pleasure taken in the world and society."

"I say so! Stella can go if she will. I give her the free exercise of her own judgment," repeated Mr. Branscombe. "As I say, I want no tribute rendered to the memory of my lost dear one that does not come from the pure well of love undefiled. Go, my Stella—forget your grief, your mourning, your mother and me, in a brisk and happy walk with Mrs. Latrobe. I do not wish to deprive you of your pleasure, my love."

"No, dear papa, I will not go," said Stella. "Perhaps, as you say, it would be unbecoming."

"And the consequence of all this exaggeration will be that you will get ill, Stella darling, and then you will have made bad worse," said Augusta hastily. "All this kind of thing is really not reasonable!"

"'The Critic of Pure Reason,'" said Mr. Branscombe, with a polite sneer. "Neither poetry of idea nor pathos of feeling—only the crystalline clearness of cold, icy reason!"

"Just so," said Mrs. Latrobe with an exasperating smile. "You could not have paid me a higher compliment, Mr. Branscombe. So let reason be your guide, dearest Stella, and come out with me for a breath of fresh air."

"No," said Stella, whose wish had now died down; "I see that papa is right. I will not go to-day, thank you—some day, but not just yet."

"My good child! guided with the finest silken thread! all heart and conscience!" cried Mr. Branscombe fondly.

And Stella, still under the spell of her early training and the glamour of her filial superstition, was satisfied and soothed; better pleased to have won her father's approbation than to have had that little break in the melancholy monotony of her life. And yet—how beautiful it was out of doors!—and how delicious a swift walk in the fields with that pleasant-tempered Augusta Latrobe would have been!

CHAPTER XX.

THIN ICE.

Suddenly the fount ran dry. The seed-time was over and that of the harvest had set in. That harvest was the praise of the public, such as it was at Highwood, when the poems were printed ready for distribution—the music composed ready for recitation—the pictures framed and varnished, and cards of invitation sent out in travesty of the artist's "private view." Then Mr. Branscombe was in the seventh heaven of delight. That last infirmity of his nobleness was fulfilled and he was the veritable Apollo of his own Parnassus. For the present therefore, what it pleased him to call his work was done, and it was time that fruit should follow upon labour.

But because he had made their yet young mourning a reason why Stella had been kept so close to work in copying

and recopying his productions that she had not been allowed even a walk in the lonely lanes or quiet fields, it was necessary for him to find a reason now why he should break so suddenly through the seclusion which had been due to his vanity and ascribed to his sorrow. And he found it in his daughter's pallor and Mrs. Latrobe's suggestion.

"You are looking a little pale, my child," he said the day after Augusta's visit, speaking as if this were his own discovery, and speaking with his best air of fatherly tenderness. "I must not have you fail, my love! We must break through our sad seclusion and go out into the world a little more than we have done of late. It will be a trial to me, but it is my duty to you."

"I should be sorry if you did anything painful to yourself for my sake, dearest papa," said Stella gently.

He sighed.

"You are all that is left to me; I must take care of you," he said. "I must be father and mother both to my Household Star!"

"Dear papa! how good you are!" said Stella, looking at him with grateful eyes.

"Yes; I am a good father to you and I was a good husband to your dear mother. The artist has not killed the man in me!" he answered, honestly believing what he said; for his vanity was so great, his selfishness so blindly sincere, that he did faithfully hold himself to be the sublime and all but perfect creature for which he posed. And when he had sacrificed his good Matilda, and was now sacrificing his daughter, to this vanity, this selfishness, he was to his own mind doing only what was right and holy. Taking the help of the lower creature in the production of such works as his made their glory as well as his own. They aided where he created, and they were honoured by their association with his genius. So much must be said for him. False as he was all through—mere mask, wind-bag, simulacrum as he was—he was unconsciously false. He lived in a world of his own where he was what he assumed to be. It would have taken a miracle to have convinced him that he was less than a genius and lower than a hero. This world scarcely gives enough credit to the transforming power of vanity—to the sincerity of a man's own self-deception; but Mr. Branscombe was really and truly in a self-evolved golden cloud through which he saw nothing as it was and himself the most transformed

of all. Had he been self-condemned through consciousness he could not have imposed even on Stella as he did. It was the very sincerity of his vanity which gave it vitality and impressiveness and which hid his own humbug from others as well as from himself.

"And as you are so pale and wan, my love," he went on to say affectionately; "I will take you for an airing and carry you among your friends. So, go and make yourself ready. I have ordered the carriage for three e'clock. We will make a little round, and I will take our friends these cards. They will appreciate the attention."

"Very well, papa," said Stella, without a sign or smile of pleasure.

She dare not say so, but how much better she would have liked a walk across the fields, and those cards not distributed nor those visits paid! She scarcely knew herself in those latter days, nor understood why she shrank with such sensitive shame from the artistic publicity which was her father's glory and until now had been her own proud delight. What made her dread where formerly she had rejoiced?—dislike what she had loved? She could not shake off the feeling of desecration to her mother's memory in all these poems and pictures, these nocturnes and the like, which were sent about among the neighbours like bellman's verses. Yet how could papa's beautiful work desecrate that dear memory? And would papa do anything whatever that was not inspired by the most sublime and delicate feeling?—papa, who paid such enthusiastic respect to that beloved memory as even to object to her having fresh air and exercise? It was impossible; and Stella knew that it was impossible.

Nevertheless, she wished that he had not taken those silver-printed cards to distribute; and that they had simply gone only for a walk together.

As it was impossible for her to say all this, and as she had not even thought it out clearly to herself, she did as she was bidden, and put on her hat and cape. Then they got into the little brougham where Mr. Branscombe had placed a pile of cards already enclosed in envelopes and directed. Before they set off he drew up both windows save for the space of an inch on his own side. Sitting so much in his close hot studio had spoiled his taste for fresh air, and he dreaded cold almost as much as if he had been a dormouse. Sherrardine was the first place to which they went. It was the

farthest off, and Mr. Branscombe took it first, meaning to work round by Mrs. Morshead—from whom the interdict had been perforce taken since poor Mrs. Branscombe's death—and then on to Derwent Lodge. The first two stood in the social column of disagreeable necessity; the last in that of unmixed pleasure. The gentle worship of pretty Hortensia Lyon was Finery Fred's present portion of delight in life. Twenty years ago it would have been receiving back in earnest the love made in jest; now he found it in mock genius and sincere praise, which did quite as well and was slightly less dangerous.

All the Pennefathers were at home in the garden; so were all the dogs; so were the two Cowley boys. The noise and racket going on when the close-shut black-painted brougham, with its mourning liveries and its coal-black horse, drove up was something deafening. Every one was shouting at the top of his or her voice; and all were shouting at once. Some of the dogs were barking in concert; others were bounding about the lawn and crashing through the bushes in sympathy and participation. Here was the click of a croquet-ball against the mallet; there the ping of a rifle fired at a mark. It was Babel and Bedlam; and Mr. Branscombe covered his ears with his gloved hand as he slightly groaned and shuddered.

"Barbarians and savages!" he muttered, then composed his handsome face to a melancholy smile as one who would not sadden youthful mirth by the intrusion of his own sorrow, yet who could not quite forget the painful fact that his heart was bleeding and that the merriment of ordinary men was not for him.

And with this melancholy smile, lingering like the touch of pale sunlight on his face, he went slowly towards that noisy, laughing, uproarious group gathered on the lawn.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Branscombe," cried Mr. Pennefather, coming forward in his frank, hearty way. "Ah, Stella!—it is good to see you again."

"Dear Stella, this is nice!" said Mrs. Pennefather, kissing her.

They were people who called all the young and even middle-aged of their acquaintance by their Christian names. Well for dignity if they did not hit on a diminutive or some queer nickname which might or might not be pleasant to the wearer!

Mrs. Pennefather, almost as young-looking as her daughters, was one of the standing wonders of maternity in the county. Forty years of age and the mother of seven children, she had the step and figure of a girl and a face to correspond. She wore neither stays nor cap, nor any sign of matronhood whatsoever save the wedding-ring which marked her state. Her tennis-costume was as short and youthful as Gip's and Pip's; her feet were as small and dainty; and she herself was as light and lissom. It was not from her however, that the children had inherited their beauty and strongly-marked family likeness; but from the father. She herself was fair; and only little Nora, the youngest, carried her impress. The rest were all "father's children," as has been said; inheriting from Mr. Pennefather their dark eyes and curly, jet black hair, their vivid colour and bright, brisk, noisy ways; while from both parents, in equal proportions, came the good digestion, good temper, cleanly living and kindness of heart which made youth perennial in the Pennefather household. They were people who would never grow old in one sense, because they would never grow indolent, self-indulgent, sour-tempered nor envious.

The girls, Gip and Pip, dashed forward too; kissing Stella as soon as their mother had done with her, and greeting her as if she had been their dearest friend. They had this hospitable way to callers; seeming to wish to make their guests free of all that Sherrardine contained, themselves included.

"How are you, dear Stella?" they shouted in their boatswains' voices. "So glad to see you! So jolly of you to come!"

"We thought you were never coming out of your shell again, you jolly little snail!" continued Gip, while Pip stood by and emphasized her sister's words, by running bursts of laughter. "It is ages—heaps of ages since we saw you! And how white you are! What have you been doing with yourself? You look as if you wanted bucketfuls of water and oceans of fresh air!"

"Do I?" said Stella, rubbing her cheeks with a quivering little smile that was only the other side of tears.

"Do you? why of course you do! Mater, did you ever see such a poor limp rag, such a ghost as Stella Branscombe looks?" shouted Gip; while Jemmy, who was suspected of being hard hit in this direction, took quite a sentimental expression on his bronzed face as he said:

"Yes, Miss Stella, you look as if you had been shut up in the dark for a twelvemonth. You ought to get out more, I am sure. A good long jolly cruise would do you no end of good!"

"Well, now we've got you here, we won't let you go in a hurry," said Gip and Pip together. "So come and sit down under the verandah and we'll have a jolly little talk together. Have you heard the news? Mr. Branscombe, have you heard the news?" shouted Pip, raising her voice.

"No," returned Mr. Branscombe stiffly.

These Miss Pennefathers were really extremely rude and objectionable young women, without manners, reverence, respect or breeding! Though glad to show them the last fine product of his genius and not too dainty to garner the coarse harvest of their praise, still, he was out of place and ill at ease in this succursale of Bedlam, and he wished his visit well over.

"No! You have not heard that Sandro Kemp is going to be married? Isn't that fun?" shouted Gip.

"Is it?" replied Mr. Branscombe with cold disdain. "I confess I am unable to see either the interest or the fun of the announcement."

"Oh, I say!" cried Gip and Pip. "It is awful fun, Mr. Branscombe. Quite too good a joke."

As ill-luck would have it, at that moment Colonel Moneypenny appeared on the lawn.

"Isn't it fun, Colonel Moneypenny?" cried the twins in a breath.

"What?" he asked.

"Old Sandro Kemp's marriage," they answered.

The Colonel's keen, irritable face flushed from brow to chin.

"Fun that he has found any one simple enough to take him?" he answered with contempt. "I hardly think it will prove fun for the woman, whoever she may be. Who is she?"

He spoke in an odd voice and with a strained manner, peevishly kicking one of the balls which lay at his feet.

"Well, we did think it was your old flame, Augusta Latrobe," said Gip—dense, pachydermatous, insensitive Gip, who would not have harmed a fly had she known what she was about and who was now doing a friend whom she liked as much damage as it was possible for inconsiderateness and

chatter to do. "But she swears it isn't, so we don't know what to think. We caught them on the road however, playing at spoons if ever any one did. But Augusta said no, it wasn't spoons at all, and that old Kemp had only been telling her a secret; and Augusta don't tell lies. Still, it all looked queer; and who else can it be? It can't be any one else, and the old fellow doesn't often go away. Colonel, who can it be?"

"How the deuce should I know? Do you think I am in the confidence of a fellow like that artist Kemp, or care a button whom he marries?" cried Colonel Moneypenny savagely. As Gip said afterwards: "The old bear snapped her nose off; and all for what, she should like to know?" "Mr. Kemp's affairs do not interest me," he added stiffly, recovering his dignity if not his temper.

"Nor me," said Mr. Branscombe, also stiffly.

"Oh, they do us!" shouted the Pennefathers—about five or six of them in a body. "Old Kemp is a jolly old boy when he is in good form; but he was as sour as vinegar and cross as two sticks at our picnic. We thought at the time it was because you had taken off Augusta; but now we think it could not have been that. Perhaps his lady-love had not written to him, or perhaps after all it is Augusta!" said Gip—this last in a meditative voice.

"Oh, Stella!" said Pip, taking up the lost thread, "I wish you could have been at our picnic. It was such awful fun—it was just awfully jolly all through! George and I changed hats and brooches, and even the Cowley boys did not find us out. It was such fun. And people came to me for Gip, and went to Gip for me, and made no end of mulls and mistakes."

And here they all laughed in chorus at the exquisite humour of the remembrance.

When the last echoes of their mirth had died away, Gip, who had a talent for blunders of this kind, said so that Mr. Branscombe could hear:

"Stella, they say that you are not going to be married just yet? Is it true? Poor Cyril! What a sell for him! I say, what a shame!"

Stella looked with a scared face to her elegant father who had turned his to this unintentional mischief-maker—the very majesty of indignation impressed on every feature.

"We have our private reasons, Miss Pennefather," he said

bitterly; "reasons which perhaps you will be good enough to believe if you do not understand."

"Oh, reasons are rubbish!" said that impudent little minx, tossing her curly head. "It is a horrid sell and a shame for poor old Cyril all the same; and I was in hopes it was not true. But now you say it is, I am ten times more sorry. What with Sandro Kemp marrying, and not Augusta, after all his spooning her so long, and poor old Cyril Ponsonby not marrying at all, people are very queer!"

"You are skating on thin ice, Gip," said Jemmy in what he thought was a low and diplomatic voice. It was heard all over the lawn.

"Thin ice? no!" said Gip in return, and in perfect good faith. "Why thin ice, Jem?"

"I tell you you are," replied her brother; and Valentine Cowley, who had been watching the whole scene and taking it all in, said quietly to back up Jem:

"Shut up, Gip, while you can."

Stella saw by her father's face that he too, like Valentine, had been watching and taking it in. She turned pale and looked still more frightened than before.

"Oh, I see," said Gip, in answer to that involuntary tell-tale face. "Poor Stella! what a shame!"

"No," said Stella heroically; "papa knows best."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Gip quite seriously. "I think if the Governor or Mater put their fingers in my pie I should yell out and tell them to mind their own business. But they wouldn't; they have too much sense. And if they or any one did I don't think I would take it as quietly as you do."

"Shut up, Gip," again said Jemmy who was the most enlightened of the group. The discipline of a man-of-war had done something for him, and his moony tenderness for Stella did something more. "Don't you see that you are making a mull of things and fouling the rope? I tell you you are skating on thin ice."

"Am I really? Well I'm sure I don't want to," said Gip in Pennefather syntax; and with that she dashed off into a tirade against Mrs. Morshead and her horrid temper, and how sweet Augusta Latrobe was, and how she, Georgie Pennefather, wished that some one would take pity on the poor darling and carry her clean away from that old dragon. Then turning sharp round to Colonel Moneypenny she cried out:

"Why don't you, Colonel Moneypenny? You were always a kind of beau of hers, even before that queer old spidery Professor came on the field."

So good-hearted, bright-eyed Georgie Pennefather managed to do a great deal of practical harm to two people whom she really liked, and to set a stone rolling which would crush more than one tender little plantation before it finally settled at the bottom of the hill.

Soon after this Mr. Branscombe rose to take his leave. He handed Mr. Pennefather a thick packet of his "Threnody." There was one for each of the family, even including the young Mr. Cowleys and not omitting little Nora. He wished the child always to remember her sainted friend, he said with histrionic solemnity; and he was sure she would prize the gift.

The family made queer faces as they received the cards which he solemnly distributed each to each. They were bound by good manners to look grave while nature impelled them so dreadfully to laugh! Between the two they were in internal convulsions and outward restraint; and more than one nearly split that thin skin of artificial decorum to let out a flood of wicked merriment which would have spoiled all. They managed however, to keep things in trim till the brougham rolled away; and then they pulled up the planks and the waters gushed out without restraint.

"A most objectionable and detestable family," said Mr. Branscombe peevishly, as they went through the gates. "I am thankful that is done with! We need not see them now for another six months! They are really scarcely human, and more like so many Cherokee Indians than like civilized English ladies and gentlemen. They are too dreadful—really they are."

"They are very noisy and indiscreet," answered Stella, seeing that her father looked for some reply. "But they do not mean to be rude or disagreeable, and they do not know half they say."

"To call them irresponsible idiots, my dear Stella, does not mend matters very much," said Mr. Branscombe. "People who do not know what they say or do are either idiots or maniacs. To which category of disordered brain do you assign the family of the Pennefathers?"

"I did not quite mean that, papa," said Stella with a nervous little laugh.

"No? Are you then following the example of your friends and saying what you do not mean?" he asked unpleasantly.

For her answer Stella stole her hand into his; but after a short time Mr. Branscombe put it away.

"Your hand is hot, my love," he said coldly; "and hot hands are unpleasant."

The visit to Mrs. Morshead was not much less disagreeable to Mr. Branscombe than had been that to the family at Sherrardine. The rough old woman had a genuine horror of Finery Fred's silky manners and artificial nobleness; and spiky as she was to every one, taking a savage pleasure in making herself like a coarse rough bit of huckaback to all satin surfaces, and of meeting affectation and pretentiousness with absolute vulgarity, she was never so coarse, so vulgar, as when she had to protest against the affectations of the master of Rose Hill.

"The fellow made her quite ill," she used to say with a sneer; "and she was sick of his fine airs!"

To-day she was a Tartar, as usual. What he asserted that she contradicted; what he praised that she condemned; she would not now even agree with him in politics, though they followed the same leaders, but turned aside that she might have the satisfaction of a fling at him with her heavy old heel. She too noticed Stella's pallor, and spoke of it in a manner that made him see she thought it all due to himself; as indeed it was. Which did not however, prevent her snapping at her daughter when the Branscombes had gone and Augusta was lamenting Stella's evident want of tone; saying in her harsh voice:

"Nonsense, Augusta! Do you want the creature to look like a milkmaid when her dear mother is just dead? You have no more feeling than a cat, Augusta! I declare you have not, and not so much," added the old woman, looking fondly at her sleeping Shah.

She too had hard work to receive the Memorial Card with becoming suavity. She had no desire to laugh outright, like those naughty Pennefathers, but she did long to tell that old fribble, as she mentally called handsome Fred Branscombe, the family Apollo, what washy stuff she thought his poetry was, and what detestable taste it was, first to write it at all, then to print it as it was printed, and finally to distribute it among the neighbours. By a wonderful exercise of self-control she said nothing of all that was seething in her mind;

but she received the card with unmistakable ungraciousness, and laid it on the table without looking at it.

"I have seen it. You gave one to my daughter only yesterday," she said curtly.

"For your little grandson," said Mr. Branscombe, gracefully presenting her with another copy.

This was more than the terrible old woman's patience could bear.

"Bless my heart and soul what can a baby make of a thing like that?" she cried. "What can that child understand about spirits and tombs and Cimmerian gloom, I wonder!"

"Still, mamma, we can keep it till he is old enough," said Augusta, knowing how children do prize things which they cannot understand nor yet play with.

"Solemn thoughts do no harm even to the young," said Mr. Branscombe, gracefully as well as mournfully.

"Solemn fiddlesticks!" snapped Mrs. Morshead. "What has an infant like that to do with solemn thoughts? Leave those to old people like you and me, Mr. Branscombe, and let the young enjoy themselves while they can. It is different with such as you and me, with one foot in the grave as one may say, and old enough to know better than spend our time in folly."

She repeated the association of herself with her elegant and well-preserved guest with evident gusto, knowing how it would rasp him to be classed with her, he having still pretensions to be counted in his prime, and she being an old creature who made herself older than she really was by her carelessness of appearances, and by that something, no one knew what, which kept her to her chair for the most part, though sometimes she might be seen walking feebly and painfully in the garden.

"I hope not quite so old as that, dear madam!" said Mr. Branscombe with a sickly smile. "Not quite one foot in the grave yet."

He forgot his promise to Stella.

"As for that, having just lost your dear wife I should think, Mr. Branscombe, the grave would be the happiest place for you," said Mrs. Morshead gravely. "If you are a Christian, as you should be, you ought to rejoice at the prospect of meeting her again in heaven as soon as God pleases, and not think your death a misfortune."

"Ah! just so, my dear madam; just so!" he sighed rather than said. "By the way, talking of marriages, the Misses

Pennefather, my dear Mrs. Latrobe," he continued, turning abruptly to Augusta, "told me that our good friend Mr. Kemp was about to enter the holy state and that you were his confidante. Is it so?"

For a moment the widow's customary self-control deserted her. Not a pale pink flush this time, but a crimson flood poured hotly over the face.

"Did they?" she said as lightly as she could speak. "What girls they are!"

Mrs. Morshead looked at her sharply.

"What is this, Augusta? Sandy Kemp going to be married, and you know all about it? What does all this mean?"

"Nothing, mamma," said Augusta with a smile that vainly tried to make itself look natural. "It is only some nonsense of those wild Pennefather girls."

"So! Where does the mistake lie, my dear Mrs. Latrobe?" repeated Mr. Branscombe slowly; "in the report of our friend's marriage at all?—or in assertion that it is *not* to a fair friend of mine, not a hundred miles from The Laurels? You must look after your fascinating daughter, Mrs. Morshead, if you do not want to lose her for a second time!" he continued with graceful jocularity. "The Misses Pennefather have sharp eyes, and they whispered a thing or two to-day which sounded suspicious, to say the least of it."

"I am not to be held responsible for all the nonsense that Georgie and Pattie Pennefather talk!" said Augusta with cheerful indifference very well put on.

"I advise them not to talk nonsense of any one belonging to me," said Mrs. Morshead grimly, and more slowly than she generally spoke. "And as for my daughter marrying again, she knows what I feel about that too well to dare to do it. I look on a second marriage as no marriage at all; and I think the man or woman who takes another partner with that poor dead thing in the grave waiting for him in the other world, is as bad as if he had two wives or she two husbands at once. No; you have had your turn, and you must keep to it; so I say to all people who marry. Alive or dead you are in for it now, and you can't go back or make another choice. And Sandro Kemp or any other—my daughter or any man's daughter—I say the same thing. A second marriage is:—I won't say the word clean out and an unmarried girl like that Stella sitting there."

"You are severe but sublime," said Mr. Branscombe. "I quite agree with you. It is, as you say, the loftiest morality, the purest philosophy."

"I said nothing half so fine," said Mrs. Morshead sourly. "I only said I thought a second marriage a sin. And though my daughter may not be a lump of perfection all through she is a good and modest young woman, and wouldn't commit that sin. That's all, Mr. Branscombe."

"I would not like to wager *all* my fortune on the event," said Mr. Branscombe, still jocular and elegant.

But the terrible old woman's temper could bear no more, and she "flew," as the servants called it, and left the master of Rose Hill with not a metaphorical rag to his back.

Decidedly these two visits had not been successful outlays of time and dignity; and Mr. Branscombe repented of his condescension, and was angry with Stella, himself and the whole world, for the annoyance to which he had been subjected. He was very peevish and uncomfortable in the brougham, as he drove from The Laurels to Derwent Lodge; but when once there he allowed himself to be soothed by Hortensia's delicate appreciation, as he called her silly craze for himself, while Stella was made happy by a long, long talk with Randolph, all about Cyril and his multiplicity of virtues, his noble character, his fine intellect, his sweet temper and his superiority to ordinary human nature in general.

Meantime the stone set rolling by those Miss Pennefathers was crashing at a rapid pace down-hill at The Laurels, giving poor Augusta yet more trouble in her life, where, as things were and even when at their best, she had so few sunny places and so many thorny tracts!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GATHERING OF THE STORM.

Sitting always at home, harvesting the gossip of the place through the gleaning of her maid and the scattered grain of chance visitors, it was hard to say which was the more remarkable—Mrs. Morshead's sharpness of penetration or her boldness of imagination. Give her but the corner of a brick and she would build the whole temple; show her but one little bone and she would construct the entire skeleton, and clothe

it with fur or feathers as positively as if she had met the creature leaping in the woods or had seen it fly across the sky. She was the centre of all the gossip that floated through Highwood as it floats through every small community; and had it not been for her the social strand would not have been strewed with half that cruel wreckage of repute for which the little place was famous.

And sitting thus at home, ever pondering and piecing, exaggerating and deducing, while she knitted her shawls and set the heels of her coarse black woollen stockings, she went back again and again on that deep blush which had come into Augusta's face at the mention of Sandro Kemp's probable marriage, and asked herself till she was weary: What did it mean? Was there any nonsense—nonsense? worse than that!—between them? Was Augusta not only thinking of making a fool of herself for the second time, but meditating what Mrs. Morshead believed to be an actual and positive sin? If she were, then her mother knew what she would do. She would cut off her and her little son with the traditional shilling, and she would leave the whole of her fortune to those three Humane Societies for which she had most sympathy. Emphatically and literally she would take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs. And in the disordered mirror of her own crooked conscience it seemed to her that this would be a holy and a righteous thing to do.

But she would not be rash. She would not act without good reason and full knowledge. So much sense of justice and fear of evil held her hand. She would watch and see, and if convinced then she would strike. Second marriages were to her, as we know, primal follies translated into sins. She thought them virtually bigamous, and held that they should be made illegal, and punished as severely as if the dead and eternally departed were only in the next street and might come back any day to claim their own again. She thought marriage altogether a mistake—her husband had found it a torture—and rivalled Hortensia Lyon herself in her contempt for girls who wanted to be wives. And she despised maternity as martyrdom doing no good to any one. Giving life to a human being brought no joy to the giver, according to her, and conferred no boon on the recipient. She excused the first because of ignorance, but she held the second to be an offence against wisdom if not decency. It would have taken a very brillant offer of marriage indeed to have recon-

ciled her to Augusta's wifehood even in the first instance; for Mrs. Morshead, of The Laurels, was a woman whose social ambition was wholly satisfied and whose desires did not go beyond her possessions. She had all that she cared to have —local position, a good income, a nice house and fine garden —and she could leave what she had where she chose. So that her daughter had no need to marry, either in the first instance or the second. But if she, the mother, had condoned the folly of that first—after a struggle and when the bitter retribution had come—she would never forgive the sin of the second. Had a man of birth and standing offered for Augusta she would have asked him sarcastically: What did her daughter want more than she had and would have? When it came to an artist fellow like Sandy Kemp—a man without a penny and whose stake in the country was represented by zero—she was simply furious, and on all sides alike. For if it were not true, it was an insult for which those who had offered it should be made to suffer; and if it were true, then would she discard for ever that shameful girl of hers, and teach her how to disgrace herself again in even a worse manner than she had already.

Still, she would watch and see. But watching and seeing with Mrs. Morshead did not include the patience of silence, the quiet following up of "stalking." It meant perpetual probing and pricking, perpetual hurrying from place to place in search of those cock-a-trice eggs which the Pennefather girls and Mr. Branscombe had said were hatching.

Quite suddenly, without the slightest warning and breaking a dead silence between them, she would ask: "When did you last see your dear friend, Sandy Kemp, the sign-painter, Augusta?" or: "When is your friend Sandy going to bring his wife home, Augusta? She cannot be much of a thing to marry him, I should say; but whatever she is, I suppose you will be her bosom-friend, seeing that you are the chosen confidante of that fellow."

One day she said, in the same sudden way, and with a curious mixture of passion and grimness:

"Answer me truly, Augusta—and look at me when you speak—has that pauper, Sandy Kemp, had the impudence to make love to you? He must have done so for all these disgraceful reports to have got about. If I had not known better, unfortunately, I should have said you were no child of mine, Augusta. A young woman like you, with a dear little son to

educate and think of, and after having made such a shameful marriage as you did, to be left a beggar on the face of the earth but for me, to be carrying on an intrigue with a fellow like that Sandy Kemp! It is enough to make your poor father turn in his grave; and it makes me inclined to disown you as you sit there, so wooden and indifferent that I long to shake you to see if I could not shake some life into you! If it were not for your little boy I would disinherit you to-night. I declare I would!"

"You are making yourself very uncomfortable, mamma, all for nothing," Augusta answered tranquilly; as she had already answered the same thing in substance, twenty times at the least. "The Pennefather girls are such wild creatures they never think of what they say or do. Else I am sure they would not have said anything to give me pain or do me harm, if they had thought of it. But they just dash out with anything that comes into their heads, not remembering that every one is not so good-natured and free from spite as their own heedless selves."

"You think you are getting out of your scrape very cleverly," said Mrs. Morshead; "but you do not get over me so easily as that, Augusta! I know what I know, and I see what I see; and I am only biding my time—that I can assure you of."

"Very well, mamma," she answered quietly. "If you are determined to see what does not exist, and to make yourself and me unhappy over a few foolish words which mean absolutely nothing, I cannot help it. I can do no differently from what I have done, for I have done nothing wrong—and there I must leave it."

"And there you will just not leave it," said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "If you think you are going scot-free like this, you are very much mistaken. I mean to search the thing to the bottom, whatever comes of it. And if I find—what I hope I shall not and fear I shall—then let you and that boy of yours look out! Do you imagine for one single instant that I am going to harbour you here in my house that you may carry on a secret intrigue with Mr. Sandro Kemp? No! not if I know it! not if I have to die for it, Augusta!"

By which it may be seen how fully Mr. Branscombe had revenged himself on that unlucky Critic of Pure Reason who would not say that his poetry was sublime, and who wanted to detach Stella from her high-toned duties and lead

her into the dissipation and indelicacy of a walk across the fields during the second month of her mourning.

Mr. Branscombe was not the only person who, having a sore feeling against Augusta Latrobe, was not unwilling to do her an ill-turn. That luckless chatter about the artist's problematical confidence of love for another and shrewdly suspected love-making on his account, had raised up for the poor young widow even a more formidable enemy than the shallow-natured master of Rose Hill; and Colonel Moneypenny, crisped and crimped through jealousy, came up to The Laurels to add his little vial of wrath to those already broken over her head. This sweet-tempered and reasonable creature's virtue of patience and self-control, fate had determined should not rust for want of sufficient exercise!

If Mrs. Morshead could be said to have a favourite in this wicked world of men, it was Colonel Moneypenny—in whom she admired all but his name; and that she forgave. There was much about him that exactly suited her tastes; and she thought if all men were more like him, things would go a little better than they did now. He was clean, well-set up and smooth shaven, save for his military moustache—which became him as a man and was the sign of his estate. He wore his grizzled hair cut as close as a brush, not hanging over his ears like that artist fellow Sandy Kemp, nor elaborately curled and trimmed like that old fop Mr. Branscombe. He was always well dressed, as a gentleman in the country should be; his gloves were clean; his boots without a speck of mud on them; and he never brought in with him a trace of the weather out of doors, whether it were windy, rainy, dusty, or what not. How he managed to look always so perfectly clean and unruffled no one could find out; but he did; and Mrs. Morshead counted it to him for virtue.

Then, he was bitter in thought and sharp in speech; a cynic and a pessimist, equalling herself in universal disdain for all humanity and superior to herself in the method of setting forth his views. They held, too, the same political opinions, founded on the short and easy way of permanent opposition. Whoever was in office was more or less a scoundrel; and every measure that was passed was one nail the more in the coffin of national prosperity and honour. Belief in good reasons, whereof they did not see the whole bulk, was a stretch of faith which they derided as credulity; but they gave each man in power credit for every evil motive

that could disgrace a citizen or discredit a politician. They were independent thinkers, they said, when reminded that they called themselves Liberals; and they held themselves exempt from all allegiance to the party to which they said they belonged. In fact they called themselves Liberals that they might righteously vilify the Conservatives, yet not be compelled to hold with any section of a party composed of so many different shades as is that of Liberalism. It gave them a wider field for universal opposition than else they would have had and opened endless avenues for proving themselves superior to their titular comrades in judgment, patriotism, and sometimes in true liberality. In a word they were the two Pessimists, the two Irreconcilables of Highwood. And as Mrs. Morshead always agreed with the Colonel and the Colonel always sent everything to the deuce, they were in perfect accord; and Colonel Moneypenny had more than once been heard to say that he did not see what people had against Mrs. Morshead—he had always found her perfectly easy to get on with and a remarkably intelligent old woman. He knew better; but Mrs. Morshead did as well as anything else for a cause of contradiction to the majority. And to defend one so universally dreaded and disliked gave him an air of generosity which gratified himself if it convinced no one else.

But if he found her easy to get on with when both put their horses' heads together and charged against all before them, he had not yet tried her with making love to her daughter. And by the look of things he was not likely to try her very soon in that direction. Stung by jealousy, piqued in his self-love, his pride of position outraged by the intrusion of a mere artist on reserved ground where he had set up his own fine military flag, feeling himself insulted in that any one could possibly couple the name of the woman whom secretly he loved with that of any other man—and that other Sandro Kemp—Colonel Moneypenny believed that he had driven Augusta Latrobe out of his heart for ever, and burnt the last traces of her image in the fire of his unforgiving wrath. He was sure that now he both bitterly despised and actively hated her; and he was also sure that he had never really loved her. It had been a mere passing fancy born of compassion more than anything else. He knew that she had a hard life with that old wolf, her mother—the woman whom he defended with his bitter smile and sarcastic allusions when her sins against the world had come more

prominently to the front than usual, and had done more than ordinary harm. He knew that the poor thing, the old wolf's daughter, had not a penny-piece of her own and that her mother made her life of dependence more humiliating than public pauperism would have been. And he had pitied her. As a man and a gentleman he could do no less. Yes; he had certainly pitied her; and had she been wise he might have been foolish. But his guardian angel had joined hands with her bad genius to protect him; and "quem Deus vult perdere" was the text on which had been written the theme of her destruction and his own salvation.

When therefore he decided on going to Mrs. Morshead to add his vial to those already broken over that peccant head, no ruth for coming pain through his cruelty disturbed his mind, burning as it was with the egoist's flaming fire of humiliated vanity. He had been wounded in those secret recesses of a man's pride where wounds fester and never heal; and Augusta Latrobe had to learn to her cost what it was to slight a man who might have been more than a friend, and whom now, by her imprudence, she had made into something worse than a foe.

So, full of bitter thoughts and harsh intent, his anger high, his pride in arms, he called at The Laurels—and found both Mrs. Morshead and her daughter at home.

Almost as soon as he entered Augusta knew that a bad quarter of an hour was before her. She saw it in the fiery eyes which just glanced at her for an instant, then turned themselves away almost with a jerk as if they had seen what was unpleasant;—she saw it in the restless lips which seemed as if they could scarcely contain till the fitting moment that flood of bitterness which was working in his soul, longing to pour itself out and overwhelm her with shame;—she felt it in the very touch of his hand, not limp and nerveless with indifference, but taking hers with the hasty touch and sharp withdrawal of an irritation that was almost as uncontrollable as a flame of fire;—yes, she saw it all; and, with that quiet strength which was her characteristic, she prepared to meet with wisdom what she could not avert by courage and to bend under the storm which she could not disperse by resistance.

For a time the conversation flowed tranquilly over safe places. True, it was always full of acidity and condemnation; but it did no one any harm if Mrs. Morshead fell foul of the

Prime Minister and the Government, and Colonel Moneypenny followed suit with objurgations against the Leader of the Opposition—if one prescribed the guillotine for Gambetta and the other a lunatic asylum for the Count de Chambord—and so on through the arid wastes of general politics. The waters might be poisoned from source to outfall, but they did no harm to living creature; and Augusta bided her time, knowing full well that this was only the flourish of appearances and that the real meaning of her old admirer's visit had to come.

And in time it did come; as she knew it would.

When the Colonel had delivered himself of his last political sentiment, which was something to the effect that the Turks should be sent out of Europe and the Russian Empire dismembered, he turned sharply round to Mrs. Latrobe—his fiery eyes ablaze, his thin lips lifted at the corners and crisped into the very embodiment of scorn—saying suddenly:

"I hear that I have to congratulate you, Mrs. Latrobe; rather I should say I have to congratulate Mr. Kemp."

Mrs. Morshead sat bolt upright in her chair, glaring savagely from under her heavy eyebrows. The name of Sandro Kemp, never pleasant to her ears, had by now become the very match to the powder-store, and her anger, never very difficult to rouse, blazed out heaven-high at the mention of this man whom she hated yet was forced to respect.

"Yes?" answered Augusta with the most benign air of tranquil indifference. "On what?"

"Oh! that is too strong!" said Colonel Moneypenny in a voice which made the widow almost start, it was so roughened by passion, so strangled and choked by bitterness. "A lady who is engaged to a man asking quietly on what her fiancé has to be congratulated—that is drawing with rather too fine a line, Mrs. Latrobe!"

"Perhaps it would be if there was any line to draw at all," she answered. "But in this case your picture is in the clouds. I was not aware till now that I was engaged to Mr. Kemp."

"Who has put this lie about?" asked Mrs. Morshead harshly. "Who is your authority, Colonel Moneypenny, for such a disgraceful statement?"

"Oh! the whole place is talking of it," he answered carelessly. "It is not one person more than another. It is every one."

"One of the Highwood romances?" said Augusta with that kind of good-humour which is held to presuppose indifference. "What foolish things people say here! How far better it would be if they had something of public interest to occupy them—then they would leave their neighbours alone."

"It would be better if the neighbours gave no cause for talk," said the Colonel significantly.

"Cause does not come into the question," the young widow answered smiling. "As for cause of gossip on my account—with Mr. Kemp or any other—there is not so much as would warrant the faintest whisper. It is just one of those queer things which happen here—a report got up no one knows how or why."

"You speak with strange confidence, Mrs. Latrobe," said the Colonel with a sneer.

"Strange?" she repeated laughing. "Well, really, Colonel Moneypenny, I think I ought to know best in such a matter! If I am not confident who should be?"

"But I want to know who has set this thing afloat," said Mrs. Morshead, sticking to her point. "Where did you first hear it, Colonel Moneypenny?"

"Where first?" He seemed to ponder. "Well, you see, Mrs. Morshead, I have heard it so often I am not prepared to say where first. I am quite unable to remember. It might have been at Sherrardine. I will not say so positively, but it might have been. I half think, indeed, that it was."

"Then I shall do one of two things," said Mrs. Morshead; "either bring those Pennefathers to book and make them give up their authority, or forbid Mr. Kemp my house. I will not have such things said of any daughter of mine. She has only me to look to for protection and support, and I will get to the bottom of this. I swear I will."

"Yes, madam, do," said Colonel Moneypenny with emphasis and a cruel look to Augusta.

"If you can," said Augusta. "But that will just be the difficulty. How can you get to the foundation of things which do not exist?"

"It is as well to try," said the Colonel dryly.

"You may try to make ropes out of sea-sand, but I fancy you would lose your time," said Augusta with a smile. "There is nothing here to find out. I can say no more."

"Then I have your authority for saying that nothing of a tender nature"—with what a sneer he said these words!—

"exists between you and Mr. Kemp, have I?" asked the Colonel, addressing Augusta.

"Certainly you have," she answered, raising her clear and candid eyes into his face. They were almost too clear, too candid, too demonstratively innocent to please him. The merest trifle of waver and shyness would have seemed more natural. And why were her cheeks so deeply dyed?—she whose warmest blush was in general rather a reflection than a blush which had mounted of itself.

"And you may add from me that Sandro Kemp never enters these doors again!" said Mrs. Morshead viciously.

Again Colonel Moneypenny looked at the young widow. How would she take this last sentence? Would it be a blow to her? a wound? a shock? He looked and saw absolutely nothing. The fair face remained as still as if it had been a mask. Not a line, not a curve shifted its place; not the faintest quiver of the eyelid, of the lip, marked the least ruffle of the feelings. Only her colour suddenly paled from that feverish brightness to dead pure white; and then the blood rushed back in a burning stream which defied concealment. She was brave truly, but she was not what she assumed to be, indifferent.

"It is the best thing you can do for your daughter," said Colonel Moneypenny, still watching her. "In her position it is necessary to be even more careful than with other ladies. I am glad now that I have been the means of enabling you to act according to your usual vigorous judgment, Mrs. Morshead. As you say, if you do not wish the report to take root it must be checked in the beginning."

"It shall be," said Mrs. Morshead, she also watching her daughter.

On this came a profound silence, during which the mother and the man, who from a lover had become an enemy, both watched the young woman as she sat there searching quietly for something in her workbox. Then, as if the prolonged silence struck on her ears as meaning their waiting her response, she looked up with eyes which were still almost too clear and fixed and candid, and said in a quite natural but somewhat monotonous voice:

"Do as you think best, mamma. It is all a matter of indifference to me."

"She is impenetrable!" said the Colonel to himself. "Old Nick himself could not fathom her! But in any case I have

put a spoke in that fellow's wheel and spoiled his fun for a time! It shall never be said that Sandro Kemp and I were rivals for any woman's favour, and that he stole a march on me where I was fancying myself secure!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAUNCHING OF THE BOLT.

"WRITE exactly as I tell you, Augusta, else it will be the worse for you."

The terrible old woman was sitting stiff, upright and square for action in the dull green chair which was specially hers. Her widow's cap was well forward on her head; the sure sign with her of a rather worse state of temper than was even usual, and, as we know, that state was never good. Her black Shetland shawl was folded closely round her shoulders, her black silk mittens came lower than ever over her fingers. By her side slept her favourite cat on his luxurious crimson velvet cushion; in her hand she held one of those eternal coarse black woollen stockings, to knit which, with alternations of shawls, for the poor, made the sole occupation of her life.

Augusta sat by the writing-table in the bay of the window. Paper and ink were before her and the pen was in her hand. She was writing to Sandro Kemp, according to the dictation of her mother, a letter which was to end all the gossip about her and him, because ending their acquaintance not to speak of their friendship.

It was a hard task; but she knew that she had nothing for it but to obey. Her mother represented the tyranny of circumstances and the irresistible power of fate; and Augusta was no stronger than Prometheus had been in his day, than Eurydice had been in hers.

"Are you ready, Augusta?" then said Mrs. Morshead, watching her daughter as she quietly arranged her materials.

"Yes, mamma," she answered in a perfectly unmoved voice.

Not that her quiet acquiescence contented the mother any more than the candour of her eyes had contented Colonel Moneypenny. It was almost too complete—too well done. Had there been a little sign of feeling, or annoyance, even of

opposition, both would have felt more satisfied. They would then, at least, have had the pleasure of victory; whereas now the walls had fallen down at the first blast of the trumpet; and when the fighting blood is up and the blow struck, it gives a tremendous sense of disappointment and checked energies to strike against a bunch of feathers which neither resist nor return.

"Say then, 'Sir,'" began Mrs. Morshead. "Don't you put 'Dear Sir:'—do you hear, Augusta? Say simply 'Sir:'—'Sir: I have to request that you will henceforth discontinue your visits to my mother and myself.' Put 'my mother' too, else the impudent fellow will be coming here to ask me for an explanation on pretence that I am not you; 'to my mother and myself,'" she repeated. "'And that you will not presume'—have you put 'presume,' Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma," she answered, her face flooded with that same kind of deep flush which had been on it yesterday, but else as still as a painted doll's.

"'That you will not presume to address me when we next meet,'" continued the old woman. "'I refuse beforehand to give any explanation of the step which self-respect compels me to take. Augusta Latrobe.' Now, Augusta, have you written it all out as I have dictated?" she asked very sharply. "Word for word exactly as I said?"

"Yes, mamma," her daughter answered.

"Let me see it," said Mrs. Morshead. "You are too slippery for me, Augusta; I cannot trust you."

"You have no right to say that, mamma," cried her daughter, firing up with a strange feeling of relief at being able to fire up legitimately about something, no matter what. "Where have you found me slippery and untrustworthy? It is too bad of you to say such a thing to me!"

"Don't speak to me like that," cried Mrs. Morshead angrily; "I will not submit to be spoken to by my own child in that insolent way! You are slippery; and so I tell you; and you are not to be trusted, for all your appearance of obedience. And for all I know, if I did not look sharp after you, you would put in a private note to that Sandy Kemp of yours, and tell him you were made to write like this, and that you were his affectionate sweetheart all through. It would not be the first time that you had deceived me; nor are you the only young gipsy who has pretended one thing to her parents and done the exact contrary to her lover!"

"Oh, mamma, how can you spoil yourself and make every one unhappy about you by this dreadful and unjust suspicion," cried Augusta in passionate indignation.

Her philosophy was scattered to the winds; and her patience broke down under the combined strain of this heavy task and undeserved insult. She could have accomplished that bitter act of renunciation, even by such a method, had her mother left her in peace for the rest. But together the two things were beyond her, and she lost her self-restraint as one loses one's cloak in a sudden storm.

"If I make every one so unhappy about me, Augusta, you and your boy had better find another home where you will be happier," said Mrs. Morshead slowly.

Rash words rose to the young widow's lips, like flames leaping under battened hatches. Her calm, clear eyes shone with an angry light which Mrs. Morshead had seen in them only once before;—and that was on a certain morning when they had had a serious quarrel over some perfectly insignificant trifle—the morning of that day in the afternoon of which Augusta had come back from a walk in the fields to say that she had accepted Mr. Latrobe, and would be married to him in six weeks from that date. Never before nor since had the same look come into her face, the same light shone and flamed in her eyes, until now. She stood, her back to the writing-table where she had just been sitting, transcribing this cruel letter to the man who loved her and whom she loved though she would not permit herself confession. One hand was on the table, the other was on the frill and brooch at her throat. Her heart beat as if it would break through the bars which held it in; her lips, which had been so tightly set, half unclosed themselves as if to speak; her bright eyes flashed and flamed;—when the voice of her little son came on her ears as he ran past the window on the lawn. She saw him as he ran, chasing a peacock-butterfly which was always just going to be caught and never was—his fair hair flying in the wind and his happy little face all aglow with health and childish joy. In one swift moment came visions of his misery and confinement in stifling lodgings, while she went out on her dull, ill-paid tasks whereby to get him daily bread. She measured his loss in health, in development, in education, in social standing, in future ease and sufficiency, as the price paid for her ungoverned passion, her rash irrevocable words. She saw it as if it had been a picture flashed

by the sunlight before her eyes; and perhaps his death as the end of all, because she would not bear her cross with patience.

Her hand tightened on the table and her slender fingers seemed to dig themselves into her throat. Her eyes dropped to the floor and her common sense, her reasonableness, her self-control, her power of cheerful self-surrender to the inevitable came down on her dangerous mood like the door of an iron cage where wild beasts are kept. She must yield again as so often before, where fighting would do no good but only make things worse for her and ruinous for her boy. Yet, not for herself. Had she been alone she would have flung up all—home, station, inheritance—all, as she had done once before. But now she was not alone. She had her boy; and she owed herself first to him.

"You know, mamma," she said as quietly as she could speak; "I do sincerely try to please you, and you know that I obey you."

"You obey me, yes, in a way," said Mrs. Morshead, looking at her from under her eyebrows; "but it is in a way I do not like, Augusta. You always seem to have something behind-hand, as it were. You give nothing but the bare bones of obedience. You do as I tell you because you cannot help yourself, but you do not do it sincerely—you do not do it with your mind. It is only lip-service when all is said and done. You keep your real thoughts to yourself, and I don't like that. I would rather you came out with things straight to my face, than think one thing and do another."

"If I do as you wish, it is scarcely fair to accuse my thoughts," said Augusta. "And I do not think you would like it if I were to oppose you," she added.

"Then I tell you I would," said Mrs. Morshead angrily "How dare you say I would not when I say I would? You are a most undutiful and contradictious girl, Augusta. I will not have you give me the lie like this!"

And Augusta resisted the temptation of that logical demonstration lying ready-made to her hand.

"At least believe," she said quietly, "that I do really wish to please you, mamma, and that if I fail it is not for want of trying."

The old woman saw her advantage. The foil was lowered and her opponent had placed herself at her mercy. No passion was so strong with Mrs. Morshead as the love of

power; and she had none of that generosity which accepts surrender magnanimously and forbears to press the fallen.

"Yes," she answered grimly; "I will give you credit for so much common sense, Augusta. You know when you are well off and which side your bread is buttered. And it is perhaps just as well that you know too when to give in. A little more of your ingratitude and impertinence, and there would have been an end to everything, I can assure you. You might have gone where you would for that dear child's next velvet suit. He would not have got it from me. I am not used to be spoken to in that manner; and what is more, I do not intend to get used to it."

"I am sorry if I offended you, mamma," said Augusta, as quietly as she had spoken just a moment since, seating herself again at the table to address the envelope which was to contain that cruel and insulting letter.

"It is all very well to get out of things in that cool way," said Mrs. Morshead. "You are cool, I must say that for you, Augusta! Any other girl would have been down on her knees to her mother after she had insulted her as you have just insulted me. But you toss your head and say 'I am sorry,' as indifferently as if you had been speaking to the cat. And then you think you have done all you ought and all that need be done."

"Well, mamma, I will go down on my knees and say I am *very* sorry," said her daughter pleasantly, going up to her mother and placing herself on her knees, while she caressingly took the disengaged hand lying at that moment idly on the arm of the easy chair.

But Mrs. Morshead drew it away with a jerk.

"Don't be silly, Augusta!" she said snappishly. "Get off your knees this instant, I tell you, and send that impudent fellow his letter."

Augusta obeyed, and did not even sigh. Her mother had truly the power to rouse her temper, sweet and equable as this was; but she could not wound her heart. Affections which are constantly chilled, repelled and refused, end at last by dying down to the roots, like vines which are too much pruned. The roots are there and the vine is not dead in its entirety; but all the grace of foliage and sweetness of fruitage have been cut away, at least for the immediate present and this year's vintage.

She went back to the table to direct the envelope. She

placed it in the letter—resisting the temptation that came upon her with almost overwhelming power—of slipping in a word already written: "This is not my own." But of what use to refrain from that which would kill all lingering feeling of tenderness and so destroy for ever this pleasant dream, this streak of moonlight shining like silver in the dark? It would be a sharp pain to him; and he would despise and hate her. She would be sorry that he should; yet, why not? Their friendship could not bring them happiness, but the contrary. It kept alive delusive and unwise hopes in him; it stood in the way of her peace at home; and if in the way of her peace, then in that of her boy's best interests. No. It was hard; but it was the best thing to do. The note must go as her mother had dictated and she had transcribed, without a word of explanation or disclaimer. She was so much the poorer, but her boy's interests were just so much the more assured.

Suddenly she was recalled to the fact that she had written the envelope by her mother's harsh voice.

"When you have done staring at that piece of paper, Augusta, as if you had never seen an envelope before, or were looking through it and the table and everything into the centre of the earth, perhaps you will write that fellow's name so that Page can read it. He shall take it this afternoon, when he goes that way for dahlias."

Her mother's voice was harsh indeed. It made the young widow start as if a pistol had been fired at her back.

"I was dreaming," she said; "and had forgotten all about Mr. Kemp."

"Oh! had you?" returned Mrs. Morshead dryly. "Glad to hear it, Augusta. But it would be more to the purpose perhaps if you would condescend to remember him just enough to direct that letter and let it go with Page this afternoon."

Without another word Augusta took her pen, wrote the address in her large flowing hand, fastened down the fly of the envelope, then held the letter to her mother.

"Shall I ring the bell, mamma, and send it out to Page?" she said.

"No," said Mrs. Morshead shortly. "I will see my own servants myself."

"I must go and call Tony, then," said Augusta. "It is getting time for his reading-lesson."

She felt suffocated and strangled, as if in another moment she must cry out or burst into tears. It took all her self-control to keep down the hysterical passion that strove so hard to get the upper hand of reason and good sense. A breath of fresh air, a loving caress from her little son would do her good. She wanted to have the child in her arms, to look into his sweet face, to see his bright eyes and hear his merry voice. She wanted to be able to hold him to her heart and whisper to him fondly: "It is all for you, my boy. Tell me that you love me—I who love you so well!"

As she stood up to go something almost as dark as a physical shadow crossed the old woman's face. She looked up sharply with her small fierce eyes set so deeply under those thick overhanging brows which gave her such a sinister expression.

"You will please to stay where you are, Augusta," she said in her hard imperative way. "I do not want you to have a private talk with Page, and all sorts of tender messages sent to that fellow, and perhaps the letter not sent at all. No; sit down again I say and let that poor child have an extra hour's play this beautiful day. The way you hound him to his lessons is quite inhuman. Do you want him to be an infant phenomenon at seven and an idiot at seventeen? That is what you will make of him if you force him as you do."

Augusta turned one swift glance on her mother, but she said no more. The yoke was on her neck and she had to bend to it; light or heavy she had in good truth to bend to it and make the best of the weary load she was doomed to draw!

Something in her face touched the old woman's shallow spring of pity. After all the girl had done as she was bidden without complaint; and though there was something about her that her mother could neither fathom nor understand—something that she felt she did not get hold of—still, she had no open cause to suspect or find fault with her. She had been a very undutiful and wicked creature to marry that penniless Professor, and then to let him die so that she had to come back here with that tiresome boy of hers—but what was done could not be undone, and there was no good in harking back over the past, thought Mrs. Morshead, with a sudden and rare accession of good sense. She did nothing now that she ought not; and on the whole—despite that inner something which escaped her, the mother, that spiritual freedom and selfhood which she would not give up but which

she only held and did not fight for—she was as good as could be expected after four years of marriage with such a man as that Professor. And thinking all this, and watching her daughter's patient face, the organ which stood for a heart with Mrs. Morshead relented, and she said brusquely:

"Go and call that little monkey of yours, if you like, Augusta. I dare say Page is at his dinner. Perhaps you do not mean to deceive me."

"When will you believe, mamma, that I never deceive you?" she asked quietly. "I do not think I could teach my child his prayers if I were living in an atmosphere of deception."

"Well, child, perhaps you could not," said her mother. "Still I don't know quite all about everything," she added, going back to her normal attitude of suspicion as if she had suddenly broken a spring. "All this mish-mash about Sandy Kemp must have had some foundation."

"It has none, mamma," answered Augusta firmly. "It has sprung only from girlish nonsense. Mr. Branscombe and Colonel Moneypenny have made up the whole seriousness of the thing. It is no other person's doing."

"There! say no more about it, for goodness' sake," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "I am sick to death of that impudent fellow's name. You are always talking of him, Augusta. It is quite tiresome—I declare it is. And go and find that boy of yours. Is he to grow up a dunce for your neglect? At his age he ought to be at school and in Latin. And he cannot read words of four letters. The child is a regular dunce! I am ashamed to call him my grandson!"

"I do verily believe mamma is getting softening of the brain and going out of her mind," thought Augusta to herself as she went into the garden for her boy. "Her temper never was so persistently bad as it is now. There used to be gleams of amiability in poor papa's time; but now her love of contradiction and her suspicion are really more like insanity than anything else."

Just so; but then nothing is so like insanity as that kind of ill-temper which puts itself in opposition to all the world; and the man who thinks no one in the right but himself is, for all the practical purposes of moral life, as insane as if he had crowned himself with straw and called himself Emperor in Bedlam.

"All the same I will take care that Page does leave this

note and that Augusta does not see him," said Mrs. Morshead to herself, ringing the bell sharply. "She does as I tell her, I know, and she seems to be all fair and above-board, but there is something—I do not know what it is—but I feel and know that it is there. She gives in to me because she cannot help herself; but she only obeys—she does not really submit."

And so far the terrible old woman was right.

Sandro had just finished his luncheon when Mrs. Prinsep brought a letter from The Laurels. He recognized the handwriting at once, and a boyish thrill of pleasure flushed his face and brightened his eyes as he took the note in his hands and felt almost as if he had heard the soft voice of the fair woman speak to him—as if he had seen her dear eyes look at him.

"She is a darling!" he said half aloud. "The one perfect woman in the world!"

Then he opened the letter and read what Augusta had written. He could not make it out. The words ran into each other so that he could scarcely see them even as mere symbols; while the sense was so hopelessly confused he could not understand the meaning when he made out the words. It was as if he had been suddenly struck blind, or as if his mind had given way. An awful terror of madness, of imbecility, came over him, and made him tremble like a frightened girl. He read words which had no sense in them—was she mad or he? Then he laid the letter down and thought over its meaning, trying to make it clear to himself. What had he done to offend her? The last time they had met they had been good friends—quite good friends, and something more. It could not have been then. Yet if not then, when was it? The whole thing was a tangle, a maze, a huge distortion wherein he saw nothing clear nor straight. But through it all burnt the one ineffaceable line—"that you will not presume to address me when next we meet." No explanations could soften that command—no tears wash out those hard words. The sweet and tender friendship which had been such a solace to him was at an end; and henceforth he was not even to speak to her when he met her. All hope was over. What had life left for him?

He felt that it had nothing left. No fame, no work, no sun, no joy. The woman whom he loved and whose love he had had it ever in his hope to gain when the clouds should have lifted from his path—that woman had taken herself

from him even in the simple way of friendship. His star was set; his day was over. Why should he drag through the weary hours of the long, unbroken night?

Scarcely knowing what he did, and only conscious of the desire to escape he neither knew nor cared where, he crushed the note in his hand and rang the bell for his landlady.

"Mrs. Prinsep," he said in a constrained voice; "I am going up to London to-day. Can you pack my bag?"

"Yes, sir," she answered; but she looked at him curiously as she spoke.

Something had gone amiss, she did not know what, only it was something very greatly amiss; and it came on the receipt of that letter from The Laurels. He had smiled when she had taken it in; there was not much smiling left in him now!

"Good patience!" she thought as she went upstairs to pack his bag; "he has surely never proposed to Mrs. Latrobe and she given him back a No! But it looks like it, poor dear. How could she have had the heart? Why our Mr. Kemp is miles better than old Latrobe she was so mad about. Well! I would not give much for her taste," was her last commentary as she got her lodger's things together and made him ready for his sudden journey.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST APPEAL.

It might be Stella's duty to obey her father's will, but it was not Cyril Ponsonby's to heed Mr. Branscombe's whim. The angle at which each stood made all the difference in their point of view; and their point of view determined their principles of action. It was a duel between the two men such as has been many times in the world before and will be many times again—a duel between the old and the young, inherited duty and acquired love, the father who demanded and the lover who desired—with the poor girl's heart as the battle-ground on which they fought—her life the prize for which they strove.

While saying to himself, generously enough, that his Love only more and more proved the sweet grace of her character by the sacrifice which she had made, Cyril was none the less determined to do his utmost to convince her that this sacrifice

was all wrong, and that her highest duty lay in keeping her word and marrying him before he left for India. This was only natural. The man who would give up his love at the first summons to surrender by another—be that other father or rival—would not have much to give up; and Cyril did love Stella with all the fervour of a young man's passion, all the devotion of a faithful heart. What else then could he do but try to prove to her that this noble sense of filial obedience, for which he honoured her, was all a mistake and wholly wrong and that her highest virtue was to give herself to him? This was the logic of love if not of reason; but love was master of the situation, and reason was pressed into his service as his henchman.

By the tone of her letters, sadder and sadder, more hopeless and more pathetic in their resignation to inevitable sorrow, as the days went by, Cyril saw that the loosening of the engagement, which had begun at Mrs. Branscombe's death, was ever increasing, while the father's hold was growing stronger and his grip tighter. If he, Cyril, could not do something to counteract this morbid influence and draw his Love once more close to himself she would slip from him altogether; and when he thought of this, he thought also of death.

He resolved then to go down to Highwood to face, as a man should, the difficulties which beset him;—to try once more to persuade Stella to follow his fortune and forsake her father's;—to give herself to love and cast filial duty to the winds. It was his last chance, for in a few weeks he must set sail to India; and when once so far away—if he could do nothing now he could do less than nothing there. This was emphatically his last chance, his Last Appeal.

It was a sunless, dull and sultry afternoon. The lurid clouds, heavily charged with coming storm, hung low in the sky. Not a bird sang in the bushes, not a cricket chirped in the grass; the very bees flew heavily from flower to flower and the butterflies and dragon-flies rested motionless on the flowers and grey stone walls. The pimpernels in the fields and the gezanias in the gardens were shut; and the scarlet nasturtiums and geraniums glowed with so much electric fire as almost to dazzle those who looked at them steadily. A storm was evidently at hand; and all nature felt its presence and suffered because of it.

Without halting even to see Randolph Mackenzie, Cyril

drove straight from the railway station to the Lodge gates of Rose Hill. There was no glad familiarity of the accepted son of the house in his coming to-day, as when he made his unconventional entrance on that beaming, bright young morning in May; no impatience of happy love that could not wait for the day but must seek to distance time by giving him chase in the early dawn; no certainty of a reception as joyous as his own breathless incoming; no hope of radiant love to meet and glorify his own. There were only pale fear and stern resolve, that sinking of the heart which forebodes disaster and that setting of the will which, while it foresees the pain, courts the struggle. He came to-day less as the acknowledged lover than the desperate foeman—no inheritor of joy entering gladly on his own but an exile breaking his bond of excommunication and returning to the home whence he had been banished—that home for revisiting which he should be again discarded under maybe a still more severe sentence. Or, should he hold his own triumphantly and be victorious over fate and circumstances?

This was the question of the hour; and the moment of its answer had come.

Surely the stars in their courses fought for him and the first omen presaged all the rest! He had tormented himself all the way down as to his chance of being able to speak to Stella alone. If her father chose to forbid, how could he prevent her obedience? But now all those fears were set at rest, for there was Stella right before him, walking slowly towards the house from the gates. She had been down to the Lodge to see the gatekeeper's little child who was ill, and now was going back to that desolate home which of late had become so much more like a prison than a home. She was thinking sadly of her sweet mother and her banished lover, her shattered hopes and that poor papa who demanded so much from her and who was sometimes so strangely cold, even while he held her so closely and depended on her so heavily. And thinking all this she did not hear the swift step behind her, nor know who was coming till Cyril lightly touched her shoulder and said: "My Love! My Love!"

She started and cried out; but the next moment her arms were round him as his were round her, and her face was lifted to his bending down to meet hers; while the only sound of welcome was a sob half of joy and half of pain, which told

how she had suffered in his absence. Nor could Cyril speak. Something that was perilously near to tears blurred his vision and cut short his words. He could only hold her in his arms—to his heart—as something lost and now found again, something tender and dear and precious which was safe for him only so long as he held it closely clasped. As she looked at him and once more met those dear faithful eyes and saw the face which represented to her all the nobleness of manhood, all the security of life and splendour of love, she forgot the dull present and the dim future; she put aside the pain that she had felt—the anguish which she foresaw—and her sob lost itself in one full happy smile, as she said in a voice that was as the very gift of her soul—"My Cyril!—Oh, once more my Cyril!"

It was all told and known; and now he felt safe. What needless torment he had given himself!—how foolishly he had lacerated his own heart! She had never wavered. His future was as safe as his past had been sure. She loved him and she would not forsake him. He had done well to come and meet that ghastly enemy of sorrow and despair—of subtle severance and vague forebodings. She could not resist him face to face. She was his and he was hers; and the little cloud that had risen in the night of absence was swept away by the glad sunlight of actual presence.

"Come to the summer-house, Stella. We can speak better there, and I have much to say to you, my darling," said Cyril; and Stella, with a sudden half-frightened look to the house, said a little anxiously:

"Yes, for half an hour, Cyril; I must not stay longer."

"For half an hour then," he replied, putting his arm round her waist; and thus in the old loving way, as if nothing had come between their love and their happiness, the two went down the side-path to the summer-house, and reached it just as the first growl of thunder broke from the sky and the heavy drops of rain began to fall.

At first they heeded neither the weather nor the altered order of things at home. They were together and alone; and that was joy enough for the moment. Then the smoke of that glad incense of love and happiness began to clear away—the first momentary excitement subsided—and they came slowly back to things as they were and to the sorrowful truths which were as spectres awaiting them. Each saw how pale and wan and hollow-eyed the other had become;

each missed that sense of security, that sense of joy, which had marked the early stages of their love. They were like ghosts rising from the tomb and looking at each other across the moonlit space where the graves were lying thick and the dead loves of life were buried. There was no reality even here, and no certainty—save of sorrow. But they loved each other. So much was sure. Whatever the future held—they loved each other.

"You do not ask me why I have come down," Cyril began, when that silent scrutiny and acknowledgment had grown somewhat embarrassing.

"I was too glad to see you to think of anything else," she answered softly.

"I am going to India in about three weeks' time now," he said. "And I have come to ask you to go with me."

She turned away her head—she could not meet those yearning, faithful eyes—that handsome, loving face, bending down to look into hers. Her hands were in his, closely, tightly clasped. She would not take them away; but she could not look into his face!

"How can I?" she sighed.

"Why should you not?" he returned.

"How can I leave poor papa? He would die if I were to leave him."

"And what shall I do, Stella! Perhaps worse than die! If you are a daughter, remember also that you are a wife—my wife in the sight of God; and you owe me as much duty as you owe your father—and more love."

Cyril spoke with a gravity and intensity which Stella had never heard in him before. It was as if he had suddenly ceased to be a boy and become a strong, mature and self-respecting man. He was less the lover pleading for a grace than the husband, as he called himself, claiming his rights. Till now she had seen him only boyishly earnest in his suit, boyishly radiant in his success, boyishly despairing in his defeat; but now he was a man of equal strength and firmness with her father, and she felt instinctively that things had come into a new phase and that the moment was all the graver because of her lover's changed morale.

"You know that I love you," she said, turning to him with the instinct of a caress.

"I know that you do," he answered tenderly; "but though you love me, you are letting yourself be divided from me—

perhaps for ever; and you are giving me more anguish than I once thought I could have borne and lived under!"

"I am not being divided from you; excepting for a little while," she answered, woman-like preaching peace where there was no peace and forbearing to look at facts as they were. "It is only while my poor, darling mother's death is so fresh—while papa misses her so much—that I ask you to put off the marriage;—that is not breaking with you for ever, Cyril!"

"And when will your father make up his mind to let you go?" he asked. "You know that every day you are slipping farther and farther away from me, because every day you become more necessary to him. When will you find the courage to leave him and come out to me if you have not got it now?"

"He is too good and kind to break my heart," she said. "Surely, some time of his own accord he will let me go."

"Never!" said Cyril firmly. "Of his own accord, Stella—never! If you have not the courage to insist on it now and to come, he will never, never let you go!"

"Indeed, you misjudge him, Cyril! You do, darling! He is broken now by poor mamma's death; but he will become more reconciled as time goes on; and then we can be married without paining him as it would now if I were to leave him. Think what it would be to him to lose wife and daughter both in a few months! And he so loving and so sensitive—so dependent on home love and care for his happiness!"

"All this means simply that you love your father better than you love me, and that you are ready to sacrifice me to him," said Cyril with quiet sternness. "We will call things by their right names, Stella. It is a struggle of love, in which I am the weaker and go to the wall."

"Not that," she answered, the tears swelling into her eyes. "I love my father dearly, as you know, and reverence and admire him as I have been taught all my life to do—as mamma reverenced and admired him—but I love you, too, Cyril; you know that I do. It is not a struggle of love but it is a matter of conscience and duty. Cannot you see the difference? Cannot you, Cyril?"

It was his turn now to look away. His face was pale and set; his eyes were fixed and mournful; his heart was sore and his pride was wounded. She did then of her own free

will prefer her father to him; and it was not coercion so much as voluntary resignation.

The thunder roared and shook the little building where they were sheltered; the lightning flashed and streamed in fiery tongues and flaming sheets; the rain poured as if the windows of heaven had been opened for the second time and the fury of the deluge had been let loose on the earth. But neither Cyril nor Stella saw what was going on in the world outside. The storm of grief and despair, of passion, of perplexity, of love warring with duty, which raged within their hearts was greater than that of the elements without; and the thunder and the lightning and the rain which tore and flashed and fell, were but the natural accompaniments of the passions which shook them to the soul and the anguish which made them desolate.

"Cannot you see the difference, Cyril?" she said again, her hand stealing into his. "Do you doubt that I love you?"

"You love me?" he said with a strong effort. How harsh and changed his voice was! She would not have known it for his had they been in the dark. "Yes, I believe that you do, to a certain extent. But you love your father better, and prefer his convenience to my happiness."

"If I could leave any one with him to take care of him and make him happy, I would not hesitate for a moment," said Stella with sudden passion. "It is not that I love him better—you know that it is not that, Cyril; it is only because he is my father, and it is my duty. Oh, you will break my heart if you look like that—if you believe that I do not love you!"

Her girlish bashfulness, her pride of maidenhood, her shamefaced reticence—all were gone—swept away by the storm of passion as the tender little buds and delicate flowers were broken and destroyed beneath the heavy deluge of rain. She flung her arms round him and carried his head to her bosom.

"Cyril, say that you believe me," she said, her lips for the first time unasked, pressed to his. "My own, my Love, say that you do not doubt me."

He felt his advantage, and he used it.

"If you cannot come with me—if you think it your duty to stay for a little while longer with your father—at least make things sure. Marry me before I go, if even you stay behind, and come out afterwards."

He spoke without any outward sign of emotion; still with that strange absence of boyish pleading and with that stranger weight and gravity of a mature man.

"With papa's consent—yes!—yes!—gladly!" said Stella. "Will that satisfy you, Cyril?—then indeed I will!"

"With your father's consent or without it?" he said.

She shrank back. The flood-gates which had been lifted began gradually to close down on the turbulence that had been let loose for a few moments. The pride of her maidenhood, the reticence and shamefacedness of her girlish modesty, the purity of her truth, the wholeness of her duty, all sent back the rushing flood about her heart and cleared her eyes of their mist of passion.

"Without papa's consent I could not," she said faltering. "I could neither openly disobey him nor live a life of deception. You yourself would not respect me, Cyril, if I could."

"Ah! it is just as I thought," he said with sudden bitterness. "Great heavens, do women know how much they torture the men who love them! All of no use!—all to no good! I am distanced and cut off! No, Stella, this is not love! It is preference—friendship—fancy—but not love!—not the love I have for you. Ask anything of me," he continued, his passion rising as hers calmed; "ask my very life and I would give it you! You could not ask anything of me, Stella, that I would refuse. Nothing in the whole wide world!"

"If I asked you to do something that I thought dishonourable and wrong, you would not do that, Cyril!" she answered, half frightened, half trying to soothe him.

"Yes, I would!" he cried. "I would go to perdition for you. I would give you my very soul!"

Just then a blinding flash of lightning seemed to set the whole place in a blaze, and the thunder crashed right above the frail little tenement where they were sitting. Stella was wise and sensible enough, but she was impressionable, and as apt for superstitious fancies as any other girl of her kind and age.

"Hush, Cyril! this is blasphemy," she cried, clinging to him in terror. "Remember God hears us, and sees us, and reads our hearts. You offend God when you talk like this."

Her terrified voice and clinging touch, her pale, scared face and spiritual distress, broke down all the new force and

manly strength which had come into him. He covered his face with his hands and burst into those terrible tears which more than anything else in the world agonize the woman who loves and humiliate the man who is loved.

"Cyril, do not cry!" she said in a low, still, shocked voice. "You are breaking my heart. I do not know you like this. Cyril, look up. Do not let yourself give way like this. Oh, darling, let us pray to God to give us strength to do what is right and what is His will! There is no happiness for us if we do what is wrong and what we know to be wrong."

But poor Cyril was in no state to be soothed. He had to fight out the fight by himself and to brace himself to bear the inevitable, as he felt best for himself. Pure and honest for his own part, he could not tempt Stella to do what she felt to be wrong. If he could have changed her heart at this moment, and for her own higher morality have substituted one weaker, lower and more yielding to love, he would; but he could not tempt her into what she felt to be immoral and dishonourable. He had to recognize and accept her virtue. He was foot to foot with facts; and he was cast. He must give up all his hope, his pride, his desire. Stella had elected to stand by her father and she had laid her conscience as the pledge. He must abide by her decision; but it was a bitter award, and he felt as if death would have been a more merciful decree.

"You shall not do what you think wrong for me," he said at last, his bloodless lips quivering. "I would rather have you pure in your own conscience than that you should do what you think wrong for my sake. If you feel it right, I will give you up. It is like parting with my life to say this; but, if you feel it right, I must."

"Not give me up, Cyril!—only wait till papa is more reconciled to his loss. This is not giving me up, darling!" she said anxiously.

"It is the beginning of the end," he returned. "If I leave England now, I shall never see you again."

"Would you wish not to see me again? Would you rather give me up entirely than keep me for a short time in hope?" asked Stella in a low voice.

He caught her eagerly to his heart and smoothed back the hair from her face.

"My Love! my Love!" he said with infinite tenderness, with loving reverence. "I would wait for you to the end of

my life, if you would come to me then! Give you up, Stella? I give you up? Never, my darling, never. If we are separated, it is by your will, not mine. You are mine to the end of my life!—my own, my Love! I could never give you up, never cease to love you, never possibly love another!"

The storm had passed and the sun had come out. That last tremendous outbreak had been the last expression of its fury. The rain-drops still glittered on the grass and trees, but the birds began to sing in the woods, the flowers raised their drooping heads, the butterflies and iridescent flies came out from their leafy shelters. The storm had passed indeed; but outside this summer-house the plot of Mary-lilies which Stella had planted with her own hands was a broken mass of tangled wreck, and the tender buds of all the delicate flowers were beaten into the ground—never to rise again, never to bloom, never to gladden the air with their sweetness nor to receive the sun's rays into their fragrant hearts.

"Come and see papa," then said Stella softly. "The storm has gone now. Come and talk to him."

"It is of no use," said Cyril sadly. "I understand him better than you do."

"Then you understand how sweet and noble he is," said Stella, speaking from the force of old impressions and life-long training, and forgetting for the instant that painful little passage-at-arms—presage of so much worse to come—which had taken place between them some days ago.

Cyril turned away. Suffering had enlightened him on Mr. Branscombe's real claim to the possession of those qualities for which his wife's deliberate devotion and his daughter's simplicity of belief had given him credit.

"I will go and see him, of course," he said, after a pause. "I would not like him to think that I had been here in secret and was ashamed or afraid to face him."

"Oh, Cyril, how good you are!" cried Stella.

She looked up into his face, enthusiasm, love, devotion in her own. Her large dilated eyes were dark with tenderness; her sweet fresh lips were a little parted; her whole heart was throbbing with passionate and high-strung admiration. For the instant she forgot that she had any cause for sorrow. She remembered only that she loved—and that her gladness lay in the grandeur of her beloved.

Cyril could not answer her. Her enthusiasm was born of his heart-break—her praise came because of his submission to

the terms of his despair. He could not return it even for gratitude.

"Good and great!" he echoed bitterly. "My Stella, say rather how weak and miserable! One more kiss," he then said, turning to her with less of the feverishness of love than the melancholy resignation of death. "I asked you to be my wife in this summer-house. Do you remember, Stella? I watched your window from it the first time I came down after we were engaged. Give me now our last parting kiss—perhaps the last we shall ever have—our very last on earth!"

"No, not our last," she said with strange confidence, borne up she knew not how over the weakness and surging sorrow of the moment. "Our last for the immediate present—but we have a future, Cyril, and a glorious one. We have a future of true love, of mutual respect and of happiness."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FINAL ANSWER.

"My child! where have you been during this terrible storm?" said Mr. Branscombe, when Stella, with Cyril following close behind, went into her father's studio to report herself and present her lover. "I have been in the most acute mental anguish on your account—the most heart-breaking anxiety."

For a gentleman who had been in this great anxiety, as he said, Mr. Branscombe looked smooth and unruffled enough. Also, he had not been idle; for he had painted in a large piece of Hortensia's gown—the folds perhaps a little fanciful, seeing that like most talented amateurs he worked by the light of imagination only, disdaining the dull prose of a model. However that might be, he had evidently diligently occupied himself during his daughter's absence, and had thrown off his mental distress by means of the eccentric curves and impossible cross-shadows which represented his ideas of drapery.

"I was under shelter, papa," said Stella in a strange voice.

Now that she had come into the actual presence of her father—the father not of her imagination but of her every-day life—the exalted confidence of her late mood suddenly cooled and slackened.

"Where?" he asked, not looking up.

"In the summer-house," she said. "The storm overtook Cyril and me as we came up the drive from the Lodge."

"Cyril? Cyril? What Cyril?" asked Mr. Branscombe with a vague air, as if searching in his memory for the image that should be attached to that name.

"Cyril Ponsonby, sir; Stella's affianced husband," said Cyril, coming forward and speaking in a calm, clear, level voice.

"Oh, Cyril Ponsonby, is it! Gad, my dear fellow, I had forgotten you!" said Mr. Branscombe with careless amiability. "And what in heaven's name has brought you out here on such a day!"

He spoke as if Cyril had come in from next door; and as if he had been here only yesterday and might be here again to-morrow.

"I came to see you and Stella," said Cyril.

"Vastly obliging!" said Mr. Branscombe with his best-bred smile, tempered with melancholy as his eye caught the band of crape on the arm of his velvet coat and he remembered all the circumstances in which he stood.

In the first flush of surprise he had remembered only the one fact—that Cyril wanted to take Stella from him; with the determination, as a rider, that she should not go.

"I am going to India in less than three weeks now," began Cyril; "and I have come to ask Stella to marry and come with me."

Mr. Branscombe put his head on one side the better to examine the effect of his latest bit of cross-hatching.

"I thought all that was arranged and done with," he said quietly. "When I had last the pleasure of seeing you I remember we threshed out that question fully—threshed it out to the last fibre. It was agreed then, I think, that Stella would not leave me—at least for the first year of her mourning; that she would not commit the indelicacy of treading on the heels of her mother's funeral as a bride given up to Circean pleasures. Why reopen a closed book, my young friend? Do you not think we have enough to do with things present and to come without going back on those which are sealed and past?"

"I do not hold this matter to be sealed and past," said Cyril. "I was willing to concede something to your grief at the sudden shock of your loss, but I did not give up my

claims. I waived them for the immediate moment; but I hold to them as absolute."

"I think you gave them up so far as any definition of time, any express limitation of suspended rights, went," returned Mr. Branscombe smoothly. "It was agreed, if I remember aright—expressly agreed—that Stella should not marry this year; therefore that she could not go out to India with you in September. Indeed, I imagine that you would scarcely prevail on her to desert me in the heartless manner proposed by you. Such a dutiful and pious child as she could hardly be guilty of an act wherein indecency would be equalled only by irreligion."

"I think, too, that Stella remembers a little what is due to me and her promise," said Cyril, always speaking in that calm, clear, level voice which betrays the consciousness of struggle even more than the loud tones of expressed excitement, and, with the consciousness of struggle, the presence of hidden force.

"Duty to parents comes first in a good girl's catalogue of virtues," said Mr. Branscombe.

"And faithfulness to a promise—fidelity to a husband—are also virtues which hold rank in her mind," Cyril answered back.

"When she has the husband, yes," said Mr. Branscombe with a slightly contemptuous smile. "A foolish boy and girl engagement can scarcely claim the appellation which includes the sacred tie of marriage."

"A foolish boy and girl engagement? I do not understand you, sir," said Cyril hastily.

"No? Yet I speak plainly, do I not? I use no technical terms, do I?"

Mr. Branscombe asked this question with the simplest air of transparent candour; as if sincerely wishing to be answered and instructed.

"Not technical terms but unintelligible ones—words which do not apply to the case in hand," said Cyril.

"No? You are now unintelligible to me, my dear fellow," he answered, smiling. "Explain yourself."

"I do not think I need, Mr. Branscombe. When you can call a solemn engagement, like Stella's and mine—an engagement sanctioned by both you and her dear mother—an engagement which this very month, almost this very day, was to have been fulfilled by our marriage—when you can sneer at

this as a foolish boy and girl affair, then I think I have the right to ask you for your meaning on the ground that you are unintelligible."

"Oh, that is where the crux lies!" said Mr. Branscombe. "I am sorry if I have offended your susceptibilities. I am always sorry to wound the feelings of any one."

"Dear papa!" murmured Stella, still in the region of faith as she was.

"Still, I must keep to my nomenclature," he continued. "In spite of all you may say I maintain the folly, the unfitness, and the undesirability of this affair."

"Unfitness? undesirability?" said Cyril, almost as if in a dream.

"Frankly speaking, my dear fellow," Mr. Branscombe went on to say with imperturbable calm; "you are not the kind of husband I would have chosen for Stella. Her mother, sainted soul!—liked you—you are, I suppose, the kind of thing women do like—and I was always the attentive interpreter of my good Matilda's wishes, as also I thought that the mother had perhaps more right to regulate the daughter's life than had even the father, I gave in to her desire and sanctioned the engagement because she had endorsed it. But now when, by the mysterious decree of Providence, she has been removed from this earthly sphere and I am left sole guardian of my child, I must use my own discretion, act according to my own ideas, and regulate her life as I think best for her happiness here and hereafter. We cannot be guided by the counsels of the dead. Though I am sorry to distress you and to annoy my child, I must speak plainly; and, plainly, I do not approve of this engagement."

"Mr. Branscombe!"—"Papa!" said the two young people in a breath.

"And if Stella is the dutiful daughter I believe her to be," said Mr. Branscombe in conclusion, not heeding those two passionate ejaculations; "she will give it up now at once, here in this room and in my hearing."

"Papa! papa! I cannot!" cried poor Stella, instinctively turning to Cyril.

The young man put his arm round her and held her to him in the attitude of protection.

"She will not leave me," he said a little triumphantly.

Mr. Branscombe laid down his paint-brush and palette, as he had done once before. He made a few steps nearer to the

young people as they stood before him, and saw Paul and Virginia clinging together in the last embrace. As he came nearer he held out his arms.

"Must they be held out to empty space?" he said, his mellow voice trembling. "Must I go down to the grave in the evening of my life a lonely and deserted old man?—without wife or child to cheer my darkened day, to guide my faltering steps? You, my child, my idolized child—my Stella—my Star—you to leave me for a stranger?—to desert me with such ungrateful haste? It will not be for long. I shall not keep her for many months, young man! Cannot she tarry with me for these few weeks till my weary eyes are sealed in death, and my lifeless form is laid in the silent grave beside her dear, dead mother? Must I be the modern Lear, pleading in vain?"

"Dear papa! I cannot bear to hear you talk like this," said Stella, disengaging herself from her lover but not giving herself to her father—standing for a brief moment as if undecided between the two.

"You look well and vigorous, sir, by no means near the tragic end you depict so forcibly," said Cyril unwisely and hastily.

His eyes were not blinded by long years of habit and tender teaching. He heard the hollow ring of the base metal so adroitly passed off for gold, and saw through the flimsy cheat which poor Stella accepted so simply for reality.

"Are you so eager, young man?" asked Mr. Branscombe with pathetic dignity, dashed with a not unnatural, not unmanly, indignation. "Are you so weary of this little spell of waiting and so anxious to have me safely housed in that grave which gives not back its prey when once engulphed, that you may enter in such indecent haste on your own pleasures?"

"No, Cyril did not mean that, papa!" Stella said in agony. "You did not, Cyril, did you? Say that you did not!"

"I did not wish you dead, sir; and I congratulate you on your prospect of long life," said Cyril slowly. "But I do not want to hold Stella only on the contingency of your death. I want her to be mine in your lifetime, while we are young and you are healthy. It is a very natural wish. I should scarcely be a man to feel differently."

"Stella has her own heart only to consult," said Mr. Brans-

combe with a sudden throwing up of his cards. "She knows that I will not stand in the way of her happiness. If she can find her happiness in this desertion of her father I will not oppose it. She may marry if she will. I will not forbid that marriage; but I cannot sanction it by my approval or my presence. I should regard it as an impious insult to her mother's memory, as well as the warrant of my own death. Let that be as it may—marry, if you will. Marry—yes, marry, my child—to-morrow if it seems good to you; but take your leave of your old father for ever, and know that you have walked over his heart to the altar and that you have desecrated your mother's grave!"

"But this is too terrible—too dreadful!" cried Stella wildly. "Papa! you know that neither Cyril nor I would give you pain."

"Yet you are giving me pain—acute pain—anguish, I may say!" cried Mr. Branscombe, suddenly laying his hand on his heart and sinking into a chair.

His head was thrown back, his mouth was open, his eyes were shut and his arms hung loosely by his sides. It was the best imitation of fainting that could be seen on the stage or off it; and it was more than poor Stella could bear. She did not see the true face peeping out from behind that tragic mask; and her father's histrionic make-believe had on her all the terrifying and softening effect that he had hoped and for which he had played.

Cyril too, though he had not had much experience in attacks of this sort, and though he doubted in his own mind the genuineness of what he saw now, was obliged to accept it as truth, not being able to prove its falsehood; and he did his best with Stella to revive that which had not failed.

After a time Mr. Branscombe thought fit to come out of his swoon and to be once more alive to facts and awake to sorrow. He raised his head from Stella's breast, sat upright and looked about him a little vaguely. Then he passed his hand over his eyes and smiled faintly, sweetly, with resignation and benignity.

"You have surprised my secret, my dear children," he said with the most touching air of noble self-surrender. "My heart has long been affected, like my dear wife's. Poor soul! she never knew! And any strong emotion reduces me to the state in which you have just seen me. After my loss I passed

nights in this semi-death—this terrible condition of insensibility from which the waking is so agonizing—so destroying! But now let the past conversation, and all its pain, be forgotten. You shall not find me in your way, my Stella. My good Cyril, I will not stand against your happiness. Marry, marry, and let me die, knowing that though I am heart-broken you are happy."

"I cannot leave you like this, papa," said innocent Stella with an appealing look to Cyril. "Dearest Cyril, we cannot leave him," she repeated.

"Yet I can die alone!" he said, smiling faintly. "It would be pleasant to see my child's angel face as the last thing on earth visible to my failing sight—the last thing here before I meet her mother there; but——"

Here he stopped. His voice faltered; he turned away his head; then taking Stella to his heart he broke down into a purely feminine flood of weeping.

So here were her two beloved men, each in one day reduced to the level of hysterical girls, and all because of her!

If Cyril's tears had been painful, her father's were terrible to poor Stella to witness. Her whole life had been trained in belief in and adoration of him. He represented to her her mother's love and reverence—her mother's counsels and decrees. He was all her past and all her duty, her love, her home, her religion. Cyril was her future, her young love and her happiness; but her father was her life; and in her obedience to him was included the approbation of the Supreme and the clearness of her own conscience.

"You shall not be left, papa," she said in a moved and solemn voice. "Cyril himself would not wish it. Cyril, you would not ask me to leave papa in this state, would you, darling? I should never be happy if I did!"

"I would not ask you to do what you think to be wrong," Cyril answered. "I only wish you to act according to the dictates of your own conscience and the inspiration of your own heart."

"Yes, act according to your own heart and conscience," said Mr. Branscombe feebly, taking the girl's hand and carrying it to his lips. "My child, choose! Your father or your lover—choose quickly! I cannot support this much longer!"

Tears stood in his eyes again and he gave a deep sigh; then he began to sob; and it seemed as if the fainting fit

from which he had just recovered were to be re-enacted. As Mr. Branscombe gave these premonitory symptoms of another collapse Cyril stiffened and hardened. Until now he had stood pale and quiet, as if struck to stone; but now his lip curled with contempt.

"Cyril, say I am right!" pleaded Stella, whose faith in her father was as yet illimitable and unshaken.

"Right in what?" he asked sternly.

It was cruel to her, but for himself he wanted the sharpness of the spoken word—he wanted to have the knife turned in his wound.

"To stay with papa," she said, turning to her father but holding out her hand to her lover.

"Good-bye," then said Cyril, after a moment of dumb agony. "Good-bye for ever, Stella."

"No, no! not for ever! Cyril, say not for ever!" she pleaded.

"For ever!" he repeated. "Your father will take you from me for ever. Good-bye, Stella. God bless you! God bless you, my one only Love! May you never repent your choice! Be happy without me, Stella; but I shall remain faithful to you to the end of my life."

He took her almost forcibly from her father, and held her closely pressed in his arms; kissed her pale face with all a boy's passion and a man's devotion—with the reverence of worship, the fervour of love; then, without another word, with no sign of farewell to Mr. Branscombe, no repeated blessing to Stella, he turned and left the room. A moment after Stella heard the house door close, and knew then that the sunshine of her life was shut out for ever, and that she was left only to the cold dim starlight of sacrifice and duty. She turned to her father and knelt at his feet, lifting her bloodless face to his in mute agony, dumb appeal. It was the devotee entreating the grace of her god to whom she had sacrificed her beloved.

"My child," said Mr. Branscombe solemnly, laying his hand on her head; "that young man was not worthy of you. You have chosen the better part, my Stella, and while you have blessed me you have redeemed yourself!"

"No, no!" cried Stella wildly; "anything but that, papa! My heart, my life, all—all I have—but leave me my faith in Cyril! As long as I live I must love Cyril!"

"Poor, passionate, misguided moth!" sighed Mr. Brans-

combe grandly. "On my breast let the scorched wings be healed!"

He raised her from her knees and held her to his heart, even at this moment his eyes wandering towards his easel and that interrupted bit of cross-hatching. But for the first time in her life her father's caress gave poor Stella neither joy nor comfort—gave her instead something akin to pain—something from which she involuntarily shrank as partly a wound and partly a desecration.

CHAPTER XXV.

HER FIRST RESERVE.

In all country places where the boys of the several families come down in the summer to go back in the autumn, the sudden transition from abounding gaiety to blank and dreary dulness is one of the most painful experiences which life can give to the girls who have lost their playfellows and to the mothers who have parted with their sons. For two months the whole neighbourhood has been riotously alive with the doings of the young fellows whose whole aim of existence has been to get through as much enjoyment as can be compressed into the twenty-four hours, and to make as much noise about it as if pleasure needed a trumpeter to tell the world how she fares. Shouts and laughter, signal and song, have wakened up the echoes of the day; and the low whisper, the fond word, the stolen kiss, have added to the harmonies of the fragrant night. These fine, swift, stalwart, beardless lads have been in their strength like young lions and in their beauty like boy-gods—lords of the earth and masters of life and of love—possessors of the present and heirs of the future alike. The whole place has been theirs. By their frank good-humour, by their thoughtless joy, by the very force of their vitality, they have taken all the fortresses of shyness and pride, of reserve and ill-will; till even the crabbedest old maid has smoothed her ribbons as they passed, and the most suspicious mother of a well-dowered daughter has learned to believe there was no harm in them after all.

And now they have gone and the bright bubble has broken! Silent, deserted, lifeless, the scene of their pleasures and the theatre of their triumphs knows them no more; melancholy

reigns in the place of delight; and the women have to endure regret where they formerly possessed gladness. No longer boats shoot down the river or skim across the lake—boats where emphatically youth was at the prow and pleasure at the helm, and the Burden was one of Fair Women with no place for Our Lady of Pain among them. No longer the ping of the guns is heard from wood and swamp, from stubble field and heathery moor. Foxes may carry their brushes in peace and pride; hares may crouch in their forms and never prick their ears in fearful listening for the footsteps of the enemy; rabbits may nibble the sweet grass of the meadows and turn up their little white tufts in disdain of powder and shot, a good aim and a long range; and all the birds of the air may fly where they will, their feeding-grounds under the heavens are once more safe and their own.

Lonesome and given up to maiden meditations, by no means fancy free, the girls are now as safe as the birds of the air and the little brown beasts of the field. They may come and go, walk out or bide at home as they list; not the most careful mother now feels anxious as to where her Juliet may be roaming nor what she may be doing. She can come to no harm; unless, indeed, ineligible Romeos should spring up on the moorlands like mushrooms in a night, or the woods should grow detrimentals like berries on the bushes. This consciousness of safety makes life to Juliet's mother a very different thing from what it was when Romeo—rich in health, in youth, good looks and hope, but with never a profession as yet to his name, nor a penny-piece to call his own save what his father pays for his education and allows him for pocket-money—was rambling through space and experimentalizing on elective affinities. Then no one knew what might be asked in the gloaming to be granted in the moonlight, and to bring trouble to every one concerned when the cool morning came and impossibility was seen to be beyond the stature and strength of love. All this harass and anxiety are over now. The hour of youthful bliss in peril, and of maternal pain in fear, is at an end; and the dulness of safety with the peace of security reigns in its stead.

This was the kind of thing that had come now to Highwood. Social dreariness and feminine freedom from danger were at their height. All those young fellows, whose presence had brought so much happiness and no less danger, had now gone. Cyril Ponsonby, no longer a joyous confident boy, but

a grave, stern, saddened man, was on his way to India. Randolph Mackenzie was in London, unsettled as to his future, but not inclining to the Orders so warmly insisted on by his cousin. The Cowley boys were at the University which had the honour of bearing them on its books, but which had not yet been able to hew out a mental pathway by which to cart the bricks of the higher mathematics into their brains. Jemmy Pennefather had joined his ship, and was now sailing away to the Chinese seas; the middle two boys had been drafted off, the one to college and the other to school; while Jack, the youngest, who loved adventure and despised Latin, had gone out to a tea-plantation in India, not far from Cyril's station. Sandro Kemp was, no one knew where; and Highwood was given up to women, needlework, dulness and regret.

The only bachelors left in the place were Colonel Moneypenny and Dr. Quigley; but these, though eligible for matrimony, were not lovers like Cyril, friends like Sandro, nor confidants like Randolph. Least of all were they playfellows like the Pennefathers and the Cowley boys. And as for the matrimonial possibilities included in their state and fortune —no one wanted anything with them.

No; the sun of Highwood had set for the season, and Ichabod was the epitaph written over its russet woods for summer green, its bare brown fields for golden grain, its autumn weeds for spring-time flowers. Spring, summer and the rich red days of autumn had gone; and they had entered now into that season of drip and damp, of mud and mire and rank decay which comes before the time of frost and snow.

Where all were sad it was hard to say who most deserved compassion. That specious doctrine of compensation was true for once, and to each was left a little flower of moral satisfaction, which in some sort atoned for the loss of the larger growth. Stella had the sense of duty well-fulfilled, her sweet unselfishness, and her beloved papa. Augusta had also the sense of her duty well-fulfilled, her cheerful reasonableness of submission to the inevitable, and her darling boy. The Pennefathers had their good spirits which were independent of conditions, and the satisfaction of devising and embroidering certain startling costumes to be worn at Christmas when the boys should be at home and there would be more than one pocketful of fun, arranged according to the

season. Hortensia had her elegant idol, who was occupied in making her mind much as she had desired to make her stalwart cousin's. And for the rest—who can undo the past or soften the decrees of that inexorable Fate whereby we are ruled to our sorrow? What was, was; and the fardels of life had to be borne, whether light or heavy, pleasant or painful.

Still, things were very blank and very dreary; and the efforts of the women to look bright and content, as they stood under their dripping umbrellas and greeted each other by the church-porch or on the roads, were heroic if useless. It was simply the meeting of the Roman augurs who looked into each other's faces and did not laugh.

A coolness, without name or explanation, had sprung up between The Laurels and Rose Hill. Augusta recognized in Mr. Branscombe an active enemy who would even give himself trouble to give her pain; and Mr. Branscombe recognized in Augusta a critic whose sharp eyes were not to be dazzled by finery nor dimmed by flattery. No wash of gold nor softening tint of rose-colour for her! No feverish enthusiasm nor blind belief for this calm, cool Critic of Pure Reason! No wonder, then, that he was her active enemy, living as he did for praise alone and caring nothing for truth and things as they were.

There was no ill-feeling between Augusta and Stella, and each knew herself loved, pitied and in some sense understood by the other; but the widow was as angry with Mr. Branscombe as with Colonel Moneypenny, and with both so far as reason would allow her to be angry with any one. Like all wise people she looked on passions as boomerangs which come back with a blow on one's own pate, save when one is so powerful as to rise above circumstances; and then they are luxuries. Being angry, she did nothing to break down the coolness that had sprung up between her and Rose Hill; but being reasonable, she did nothing to add to it. She took no public action, and to the world was on exactly the same terms as before; but she kept away from the house—and Mr. Branscombe understood why.

One day the two young women met face to face on the road. Both were walking—Augusta with her child, Stella alone.

"Why, Stella, alone! How is this?" cried Augusta, as they came up to each other.

She took the girl's hands in hers and kissed the poor, pale

face that looked so white and wan, surrounded by its mourning veil, for all that this was the public road and a ploughman had his horses' heads to the hedge.

"Papa has gone to Derwent Lodge. He did not want me to-day, and said I had better go for a little walk," answered Stella.

She had the leaden look and listless accent of a person whose fount of happiness has run dry, and whose life is now one of sufferance rather than of active energy. She carried her cross in patience truly, but she did not try to cheat herself into the belief that it was wreathed with flowers not thorns.

"Turn back with me and come for a pleasant walk by the river-side. It is fresher than this dull road; and Tony and I are going. Come! It will be better for you than tramping along the highway by yourself."

Stella had an idea, by no means hazy, that her beloved papa would rather she did not walk by the river-side or elsewhere with Augusta Latrobe; and had she seen her way to an excuse she would have refused on any ground but the right. But she was taken unawares and unprepared; and she could not find it in her heart to pain this sweet-tempered, kindly-mannered woman, who had always been good to her and who had, besides, been such a favourite with dearest mamma and Cyril's staunchest friend. So, yielding to the temptation of complaisance, she said: "Yes, she would go; and it would be pleasanter by the river-side with Augusta and little Tony than here on the dull high-road by herself."

Whereat the two went into the field through which they had to pass before they reached the river, and talked as they went on everything outside their hearts and in which they felt no kind of interest.

Augusta had not been to the river since that day when she had met Sandro under the elm-tree, sketching the rock overgrown with flowers. This had been the day after Mrs. Branscombe's funeral; and though she was as little superstitious as weak, she caught the coincidence of thus falling upon Stella on the very day when she had determined to brave her memories and suppress them by the overlay of a new association. These coincidences which mean nothing, often occur in our lives, she thought sagely. Still it was odd; and she noted it curiously.

"Augusta," said Stella suddenly, just as they crossed the

field and came full on to the river; "what has become of Mr. Kemp? Do you know?"

She spoke without note of warning; quickly, abruptly; as if the sight of that river, which ran so full of his name and presence to Augusta, had suddenly brought the artist to her mind too.

"I do not know, dear," answered the widow, turning to struggle with a tough bit of ragwort and calling to her boy to come and have a few golden flowers stuck into his cap.

"You do not know where he is?" said the girl again. "Then no one does, for you were his best friend."

"Was I?" replied Augusta, occupied with her boy's cap and his golden flowers. "I was not aware of that fact, Stella mia," she continued with admirable indifference; "but if you say so, I suppose I was."

"We always thought so," said Stella.

"Oh yes, I remember now!" replied Augusta with a little dash of malice which she knew Stella would not understand. "Your father made out some odd theory of the same kind the last time you called on us. But you have it all to yourselves," she added with a forced laugh. "I make you a present of the whole affair—friendship, intimacy, everything."

"I did not know, of course, but I always thought you were very great friends," repeated Stella, wide of the truth and dense as to her companion's meaning. "At all events, he has left Highwood and I do not think that he intends to come back."

"So?" returned Augusta quietly; but her fair face grew from fair to pale, and she opened her lips while her nostrils dilated as if her breath came with difficulty.

"He is very unhappy about something; so perhaps that marriage which was talked about is broken off, poor fellow!" said Stella, her eyes filling with tears.

Reason enough, according to her own sorrowful glossary, why any one should be unhappy, and why tears should come into her eyes for sympathy with those who, like herself, had lost their Love!

"Perhaps it is," said Augusta. "Who told you he was unhappy?"

"Mary—Mrs. Prinsep. She did not say why. She said indeed, she did not know; but he left Fernacres quite suddenly one day after he had received a letter; and he did not

say where he was going. Nor has he written to say where he is, nor when he was coming back. It is very strange, is it not?"

"Very strange," said Augusta, speaking automatically.

"Poor fellow! Something must have gone wrong!" continued Stella.

"Yes, something must," said the widow.

"I wonder what it is, Augusta!"

"I wonder," was the echo.

"Mary said he looked dreadfully unhappy," continued the innocent torturer.

"Ah?" returned her listener.

"I am so sorry he has left like this. I had seen a good deal of him lately. Papa used to have him to the house very often; and I liked him so much. He was always so kind and gentle. I liked him really very much of late; did not you, Augusta?"

"I? Yes, I liked him," said Augusta, in the manner of one waking from sleep and making an effort to concentrate her attention. "Every one liked him, so far as that goes," she added vaguely.

"What a miserable world it is! How much unhappiness there is everywhere!" said Stella. "Once I used to think that every one, excepting the very poor, was necessarily happy. I could not imagine why people complained so much of the miseries of life; but now I do not wonder. Every one seems to be so wretched! I really think the Pennefathers are the only thoroughly happy people here. Even Hortensia is not sincerely so, though she declares that she is; and you are not either, Augusta."

"No, I am not happy," said Augusta with a sudden rush of feeling. "Certainly, I am not happy!"

"Poor darling! you must be wretched! I know you must," said Stella, thinking of the dead husband with a side glance to the living mother. "You have lost so much!"

For a moment Augusta felt inclined to open her heart and make the girl a present of her confidence. She stopped herself in time, and kept back the dangerous thoughts before they took shape or sound in words. No, she must be silent. It was not in her way to make confidences at any time. She knew that the more she was sufficient for herself the more completely she would triumph, not only over her own weaknesses which were few, but over her external difficulties which

were many. Besides, an unmarried girl cannot understand how a widow, or a woman past her first youth, should be in love at all. The one is sacrilegious, the other ridiculous. No; she must not reveal herself to Stella Branscombe, She must receive confidences, not give them; give sympathy, not receive it. She must let no one see the shadow of the cross she bore for love of her boy—she must scarcely confess to herself that she bore any cross at all! Strength grows better the less we dig about the roots of our difficulties, and sorrows increase by contemplation but dwindle when we refuse to look at them. Nor could she even say: "I have had to write a dreadful letter to Mr. Kemp," for that would be giving the clue which would lead straight into the heart of the maze. She must say nothing save what was substantially untrue as an indication, as she repeated Stella's words:

"Yes, I have indeed lost much! But not more than you have, my darling. You, too, have lost all."

"I have papa," said Stella with a sob.

"And I my boy," said the widow, checking a sigh.

Suddenly she turned with strange passion to the girl.

"Oh, Stella!" she cried, stopping in her walk and laying her hands on the shoulders which had once been so round and smooth and were now so sharp and angular; "you should have done as I told you. You should have married Cyril Ponsonby! You should not have minded what any one said—you should have kept your promise and have married him!"

"How could I, Augusta?" said Stella piteously. "Papa would have died without me!"

"Oh, no, he would not!" said Augusta, still with the same odd unusual heat of manner traversed now by a bitter vein of sarcasm. "He would have got on quite well without you. He would have missed you at first, of course, but he would soon have made some comfortable arrangement for himself, and he would have been quite as well satisfied as he is now. And you and Cyril would have been happy. Now you will regret your loss all your life, and so will Cyril. For of course I know, like all the world, that the engagement is broken off now—not only the marriage postponed, as it was at first; and I know that I may speak to you as if you were my younger sister."

"But papa is so good. He could not have been left after poor mamma went. It was my duty to stay with him. And

he is so good," Stella said again, as if she were repeating an ave or a charm.

"If he had been as good as you say, he would have let you marry and be happy, instead of sacrificing you to his own vanity and selfishness," thought Augusta. But again she pressed back dangerous thoughts before they had taken shape or sound. Stella's blind faith in her father almost irritated her seeing so clearly as she did; it seemed to be less filial piety than intellectual fatuity; and she longed to enlighten the girl and make her see the truth as she herself and others saw it. Still, it was not her duty, Augusta reflected, to open a daughter's eyes to the pitifulness of the sham whereof love had made a demigod; but she kept to her point all the same.

"You should have married him," she repeated, as warmly as before. "You have ruined his life as well as your own; and it was not in your duty to throw him off as it would be in mine. You have no one to care for, to protect, for whom to sacrifice yourself as I have. Your father can take care of himself; my boy can not—and he has only me to love him and take care of his best interests."

And then, how strange a thing to happen!—Augusta Latrobe, the calm, reasonable, self-restrained woman suddenly loosed the reins of her control and covered her face in her hands; and Stella saw the tears steal through her fingers and fall like rain to the ground.

She was shocked, startled, half-frightened. She felt as if Augusta had told her that she had some mortal malady and must die, or had committed some deadly crime and must be punished. She could not understand it all, nor see what she meant and to what she alluded; when suddenly the little fellow came running up to his mother, clinging to her gown and whimpering.

"Mamma, why do you cry?" he said. "This is just the place where you cried that day when we saw Mr. Kemp. What makes you always cry here? Has Stella been talking to you as Mr. Kemp did?"

The truth leapt out like fire into the girl's face.

"She loves Sandro Kemp and has had to refuse him because her mother would not let her marry him!"

This was the meaning of it all. Henceforth she knew the secret of her friend's life. It was a shock, of course, a wrench to her respect, a trial of her faith, as Augusta knew that it

would be. But mental prejudices generally go down before affection and sympathy, and Stella remembered only that her friend suffered, and forgot that as a widow beyond thirty she had no right to suffer as she did at all.

"Poor darling! poor love!" she said in an undertone, kissing her even as Augusta had kissed her, from the fulness of her sympathy and sorrow.

The widow raised her face and returned the caress.

"Never speak of this to me," she said in a low voice; and then gave herself to the task of comforting her little boy who had suddenly broken his heart for sorrow, fear and jealousy together.

So now the two understood each other without fuller explanation, but with perfect confidence; and womanlike, each was as much interested in the other's love as if it had been her own. And while Augusta wondered if she could not induce Stella still to marry Cyril, Stella wondered if there was any way by which Augusta could possibly permit herself to marry Sandro. Poor, dear, loving women! And the men for whom they wept thinking them hard, cold and heartless!

This walk and confidence with Augusta Latrobe was the first secret kept from her father in Stella's transparent life. She felt as if she had somehow fallen from grace and had come into sin, and as if she should never be her old innocent self again, because she did not run, open-mouthed, to tell him all that she had done and learned. She would not even say that she had seen Augusta. She did not know why, but she could not volunteer even this apparently insignificant little statement. Nevertheless, when, later in the evening, he asked her where she had been? and whom she had seen? she would not conceal the bare bones of the fact if she still kept the heart of the circumstance hidden.

"I met Augusta Latrobe, and went for a walk by the river-side," she answered.

Mr. Branscombe frowned.

"Of all the young women in the place she is the least desirable companion for you," he said slowly and emphatically. "I thought I had made this clear to you already, my child. However that may be, you will bear it in mind for the future, will you not? I do not approve of Mrs. Latrobe as your companion. This is the text on which you must embroider the various renderings of obedience and renunciation as occasions may occur. You understand me?"

"Yes, if you wish it, papa," faltered Stella. "It is so unfortunate that you do not like her," she added, plucking up so much courage of opposition as was contained in this plea. "She is so very kind and sweet! And I always remember that dearest mamma liked her so much, and was so sorry for her."

"As I once expressed myself to you, my dear Stella, your sainted mother, my good Matilda, had the unfortunate propensity for making pets of very undesirable people," said Mr. Branscombe significantly. "Of more than this objectionable young woman," he added with a cruel smile.

Stella said no more. She knew for whom her father meant the ricochet of this bullet aimed at Augusta; and Mr. Branscombe, looking at her flushed face and a certain unexpressed fire of indignation in her blue eyes, wondered for a moment if it were in the possible ordaining of future things that his Star should become less radiant than heretofore—his docile child learn to be so far disobedient and recalcitrant as to encourage affections which he disallowed.

To make sure of her, at least for the present, he gave himself a great deal of trouble that evening; putting himself forth, as he so well knew how, as the embodied ideal of moral perfection and mental splendour; dazzling, as so often before, the mind made subservient to his by the long training of love and worship—till Stella felt that for papa—dear, dear papa—martyrdom itself would be not only right but easy.

It was a little trial to her on all sides, when next Sunday she and Augusta met in the church porch as the manner of the place was, and she had to speak to her with studied indifference. Mr. Branscombe had by now relaxed the severity of his mourning isolation; and he and Stella joined the Sunday church-door club according to the manner of the Highwoodites in general. As usual, he did not see the pretty widow clearly enough to shake hands with her, but he watched his daughter while appearing to be occupied only with Mrs. Lyon and Hortensia. Augusta saw the whole position as clearly as if it had been laid down in black and white; and she knew what Stella was feeling and what were her difficulties. Wherefore she simply smiled and gave the girl's hand a friendly, secret squeeze which betrayed nothing and confessed all. Then she passed out into the damp fog with the noisy Doves, and troubled no one. But Stella had now a secret in her hitherto pure and crystalline life. She

had established a private understanding with Augusta Latrobe whom her father disliked, and bade her dislike also and shrink from. And she, of all in Highwood, knew the secret of the young widow's life and what had been the moving cause of Saudro Kemp's sudden departure. It was a terrible burden for a girl who had never thought a thought nor done a deed with the faintest semblance of reserve or mystery. But fate is often very hard on us; and nothing pleases a malign fortune so much as to push us into actions uncongenial to our qualities. The truthful she forces into insincerity, the self-sacrificing have to appear selfish, the generous are thrust into misers' rags, and the gentle-hearted have to be judges and executioners. And this malignity Stella experienced for the first time, when, the very soul of truth and candour as she was, she returned Augusta's hand-press with one as significant and warm, and neither wished nor allowed her father to see.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"RUN DOWN."

"How ill Stella Branscombe is looking!"

This was the one common piece of news which each exchanged with each and all passed on to the next comer.

And she was, as they said, looking wretchedly ill. She was pale and thin, to the loss of all that lovely colouring, that graceful outline, so characteristic of her former self. Her eyes were too deeply sunk for one so young, and large blue circles were round the orbits. Her lips were too colourless, her hands too transparent, her step was too heavy, her bearing too listless. And she had, beside this want of life and spirit, a harassed expression in her face behind which could be read a certain kind of strange fear that set folks wondering why, and made them think of Mrs. Branscombe. So that many supplemented their first piece of information with: "and how like she grows to her poor mother!" But, like that mother, she did not complain; and when asked somewhat significantly how she was, answered always in the same way: "Well—quite well, thank you."

Of course her father saw nothing of what was so visible to every one else. Devoted to elegance and art as he was, he

shut his eyes to the prosaic conditions of indigestion and nervous exhaustion; and if forced to accept "delicacy" as a fact, accepted it only in its æsthetic aspect, and worked it up with images of spirits and angels and flowers and moonlight nights, of mist-wreaths on the hill and of snowflakes on the young grass. He could not by any possibility come down to the gross truths of physiology, and preferred his poetic rendering to any scientific interpretation that could be given.

It was rather an awkward position for Dr. Quigley. He saw, even more clearly than the rest, that Stella had "run down," but he was not called in to give his opinion; and professional etiquette is against a man's taking a patient by force or volunteering advice without leave asked or request made. Nevertheless, he determined to break through the conventional etiquette so far as he might, and to do what he could to make Mr. Branscombe see things as they were, and do his duty when he had seen them. Accordingly, one bright, crisp, frosty day he went up to Rose Hill, and found father and daughter at home, with Hortensia Lyon to bear them company.

He was ushered into the studio where Mr. Branscombe received those visitors whose presence pleased him or whose praise he coveted. The room was hot, close, stifling; full of the odours of paint and varnish and heavily-scented greenhouse flowers, combined with the perfume of a small fountain of eau de Cologne, always playing on the table. The atmosphere and temperature alone were sufficient to account for any amount of pallor and lassitude in the girl, thought Dr. Quigley. Add to these the constant stooping over her desk and the strain of that unremitting mental servitude which was demanded of her by her father—and, thought the doctor again, what stuff it was when it was done!—and was it to be wondered at if Stella looked worn-out and run down as she did, and as if she would fall into a severe illness unless her present disastrous mode of life were interrupted?

Dr. Quigley loved this girl as if she had been his own. Had he not loved her mother as the one perfect woman of his life?—venerated her as the saint whose sufferings he had known without confession and whose martyrdom he had tried in vain to avert? Loving and pitying the child—loving, venerating and pitying the mother—his feelings for Mr. Branscombe were not of the most amiable kind. But he had to dissemble, like the stock villain of a Surrey melodrama;

and though he could not stoop to the indignity of obtaining by flattery what would be denied to direct demand, still he, like every one else who had to influence Mr. Branscombe, was forced to finesse deeply that he might catch the trick. If he could have done as he would, he said to himself, he would have taken that old fop by the scruff of the neck and have thrust him into the midst of good useful prosaic parochial work, which would have necessitated open-air exercise and being somewhat hardly handled by his fellow-men. He would have taken Stella clear away from Highwood and her father, and would have sent her off to India by the next mail, with directions to be given into Cyril Ponsonby's keeping and married out of hand the day after her arrival. As for Hortensia, whose character he understood to the echo, and whose feelings and motives were clearer to him than they were even to herself, he would have put an interdict on Rose Hill and Mr. Branscombe; he would have taken her out of her father's hands and given her into those of her mother, with instructions to be carried out to balls and parties and theatres and operas till some of this Puritanical nonsense had been knocked out of her and a little of the mildew of moral affectation had been rubbed off her silly little mind. But instead of all these strong and wholesome measures he had to dissemble in good truth, and to content himself with a mere "Pouf!" as he flung back his coat, wiped his forehead, fanned himself with his handkerchief, and said in a cheery fox-hunting kind of voice:

"You are terribly hot here, Mr. Branscombe! How stands the thermometer? And don't you find all this scent oppressive! It would give me headache in half an hour."

"I am a Son of the South," said Mr. Branscombe with a languid smile. "Warmth, flowers, perfumes—these are as necessary for my existence as the gross bread and meat of coarser organizations. I must have them if I am to live at all."

"But these two young ladies here are daughters of the North; and this kind of thing is especially bad for Miss Stella," returned the doctor. "I understand now why she looks so pale and run down. She wants more exercise in the open air than she has, and a fresher and cooler atmosphere than this when she is in the house. Believe me, this is destruction for a young creature of her age. And, Miss Hortensia Lyon, you too have no business here! Why are

you not running about the garden instead of sitting in the house such a day as this? Hothouses are bad rearing-grounds for the young."

"I like warmth and I adore hothouse flowers," said Hortensia primly.

Stella did not speak.

"Tut! what you like and what you adore don't come into the question," said Dr. Quigley with a good-humoured impatience of manner that matched her real annoyance well enough. "Both you young ladies, I say, have no business in such an atmosphere as this. You ought to be out now on the Broads with the rest. The water is frozen as thick as a mill-stone, and all Highwood is skating. Such a glorious day as this, it is a pity that you are not both out. What do you say, Miss Stella, eh?"

Stella glanced with a hurried look of inquiry at her father. Hortensia turned her large eyes slowly to Mr. Branscombe, and fixed them on his face with that kind of worshipping humility which finds in obedience to superior power the greatest happiness of a loving life.

"I think tnat papa wants me," said Stella nervously.

"Not to your own disinclination, my child," said Mr. Branscombe loftily.

"If you like to go out, Stella, I can finish your copying," said Hortensia, a certain eagerness of hope mingled with an amount of reproach in her voice.

Always the faithful Abra!—always the constant incense-bearer!

"No, Miss Hortensia, you have no more right to be here than Miss Stella," said Dr. Quigley. "Let me advise you all—you, too, Mr. Branscombe, as well as the young ladies—put on your strong shoes, wrap up warm, go to the Broads where they are skating, and all three of you take a turn on the ice. That will put a little colour into your faces; for you are all as pallid as if you had not half a dozen red corpuscles among you! And upon my soul you will have to send for me before long if you do not mend the error of your ways! Let me advise you as a friend and a doctor too."

"If the ladies will," said Mr. Branscombe stiffly. "For myself, I am beyond the need of such vulgar considerations."

"As fresh air and exercise?" said Dr. Quigley. "Then you are beyond the conditions of ordinary humanity," he added with ill-concealed contempt.

"We do not wish it if you do not, papa," said Stella.

"It is so far nicer here!" echoed Hortensia, whose occupation was nothing more onerous than sitting by Mr. Branscombe, watching him paint and listening to the frothy rubbish which he offered and she accepted for poetry of the loftiest kind and morality of the sublimest cast.

"Tut!" said Dr. Quigley again. "Go and put on your bonnets, both of you—else, Miss Hortensia, so far as you are concerned, I shall be forced to say a word or two in your mother's ear which you will not like when it has to be translated for your benefit. I cannot have you all run to seed in this way. Come, Miss Stella, put that writing of yours away. It is a positive sin to waste such a day as this indoors."

"Shall we, papa?" asked Stella.

What a wicked girl she was to be so weary of her present life and endless absorption in papa's beautiful work!—and how worse than wicked to be so tired of Hortensia Lyon! Hortensia was right to reproach her with those grave reproving eyes. Yes; she was wicked, and her friend knew it.

"I wish no sacrifice of young lives. Go, my dears," said Mr. Branscombe majestically; and Stella felt the burden of her sin in his tone as well as in Hortensia's eyes.

"Stella, you are inexplicable! I cannot understand you," said the little Puritan with frank, ungodly temper, as they went upstairs.

"No?" returned Stella wearily. "Sometimes I cannot understand myself."

Few people indeed can, when they come to the state in which she was—utterly weary with her present conditions yet without energy enough to know what she would like better. She only knew that she was tired of copying papa's poetry and music; that she was tired of being always in the studio; that she was tired of seeing Hortensia Lyon day after day, day after day;—Hortensia always, and no one else; and that, above all, she was tired of that odd jargon and jumble of words which were always sounding in her ears and never entering into her mind, never giving her a new thought, a definite fact, a clear image, or a cheerful sensation. She was so tired of it all and wished that she could go to sleep with her dear mother! But, save this wish, which was not to be called an active desire, she did not know what it was that she wanted in the place of that which she had. "Run down" to

the extent of patient despair; and she so young and once so near the green glades of Paradise!

"You must look after that child of yours," said Dr. Quigley, when the girls had left. "She is going the way of her mother; and unless you look out, by George! Branscombe, she will slip through your fingers before you know where you are!"

He spoke with intentional abruptness and coarseness of tone, thinking that this old fop had need of some smart blow if that rhinoceros' hide of his self-conceit were to be made to feel.

"Oh, you doctor fellows are always on the look out for 'cases,'" said Mr. Branscombe irritably. "My daughter's health is perfect; simply perfect. She has never had a day's indisposition of any kind, and seems to me to be in the most satisfactory condition possible. If you had said that *I* wanted looking to I should have understood it. Had you even said that Miss Lyon's constitutional fragility might give those who love her cause for uneasiness, that also I should have understood. But, my dear sir!" here he smiled in a superior and sarcastic way; "Miss Branscombe is simply superb—in perfect condition, mind and body; and I thank God for it!" he added, piously raising his eyes to the ceiling.

"Now, see here, Mr. Branscombe," said Dr. Quigley; "it is no business of mine to warn you—don't you see? My business would be to let your daughter go on as she is now, when I should have a 'case.' as you call it, on my hands and a pocketful of fees as the result. But I don't want this case, and I would rather never receive another fee again than one for Stella Branscombe's illness. So I give you fair and friendly warning. If you do not loosen the curb a little—provide the girl with some kind of amusement necessary for her age—force her to go more into the fresh air than she does,—make her take exercise and give up this eternal poring over her desk in this hot, heavily-loaded atmosphere, Stella will die—die, sir, so surely as her mother died before her. I do not mince matters, you see; for I am in earnest. The girl is going the same way as her mother, and"—significantly—"from the same cause."

"God bless my soul, what can I do with her!" cried Mr. Branscombe angrily. "She has her appointed duties and she must fulfil them. You are alarming me without cause, Quigley. She is not in the bad way you make out.

I am; but she is not—and I cannot lose her valuable co-operation. Everything will go by the board if I do!"

"As to that, take a secretary," said Dr. Quigley. "Rather a dozen secretaries than lose your daughter."

"You startle me, you distress me, you disturb me," said Mr. Branscombe. "How can I take a secretary? Why not advise me to take a white elephant at once! Where shall I find a secretary? How can I introduce a young man with a rumpled shirt-front and inky fingers into the penetralia of my establishment? He will steal my ideas and fall in love with my daughter."

"In all probability he will do neither one nor the other," said Dr. Quigley brusquely. "But the difficulties of the position are not my affair. My duty is to warn you, as I have done, that your daughter's health is giving way to such an extent—she is running down so rapidly—that unless some radical change is made in her mode of life I will not answer for the consequences. Ah! here they come!" he cried, as the girls entered the room. "Now for a brisk good walk to the Broads, and a tumble or two on the ice to whip up the circulation!"

"Miss Branscombe and Miss Lyon are not a couple of milk-maids," said Mr. Branscombe with haughty irritation.

"And a deuced sight better for both if they were," returned the doctor—his chin in the air and his keen eyes full of fire. That fellow's airs and affectation always tried his patience, as he said to himself. That such a selfish windbag as this should have been the husband of that saint and the father of this sweet child! "Ah, well! Providence has queer ways of its own," said Dr. Quigley as he turned from this stately, refined and artificial house and drew a deep breath when well out in the sunshine and the crisp cold air of this bright winter's day.

As his daughter and his young worshipper had to "leave off work," by orders which the master of Rose Hill was too wise in his generation to disobey, it was not in the nature of things that Mr. Branscombe should stay behind and alone. He therefore made himself fit to bear the inclemency of this frightful weather, as he put it; and in his fur-lined coat, with its deep collar and cuffs of Astrachan, his broad-leaved, Rembrandt-looking hat, and beaver gloves, he was really glad in heart to have the opportunity of showing himself. "He certainly was a handsome fellow," he said to himself, as he

pulled his hair into festoons and curls from beneath his hat and settled himself with precision everywhere, from his head to his feet. Certainly a handsome fellow, now and always; "Handsome Fred Branscombe" to the last! So Hortensia thought, and so Stella thought too; and the three set out to walk according to the doctor's directions, for the sake of that health and "tone" which burnt away like tinder and was dissipated like smoke in the life and atmosphere of the studio.

And as they were going Mr. Branscombe, taking the suggestion as his own, told Stella that he was going to lighten her labours by engaging a secretary, so that she might have more time to amuse herself—he said this with a strange kind of emphasis—and more opportunity for fresh air and exercise.

"But, papa——" she began.

"Let me be your secretary, Mr. Branscombe," interrupted Hortensia. "Nothing would make me so happy, and I am sure I could do it with a little practice. I should soon be able to do almost as well as Stella."

"Quite," said Mr. Branscombe emphatically.

"If papa thinks it too trying for me would it not be so for you too, Hortensia?" said Stella a little hurriedly.

She was not jealous by nature—not in the least; but the thought of Hortensia at Rose Hill every day by right did undeniably startle her, and not pleasantly.

"Hortensia would put goodwill into the work," said Mr. Branscombe cruelly.

"Oh, papa! does that mean that I do not?" cried poor Stella, her eyes filling with tears.

"That means nothing against you, my dear," said Mr. Branscombe. "It means only praise of your good little friend. Is commendation of the one blame of the other? Fie!"

"No—but——" began the girl.

"No—but——. But I know who is a very silly, jealous little girl," said Mr. Branscombe with forced jocularity; "so do not let us have any more 'No buts.' If your good little friend is willing to undertake the office I shall be only too proud to accept her services. Between you both I may hope to get something done."

And as by this time they had reached the Broads further conversation on the subject was impossible.

In the evening, Hortensia broached her notable scheme to

her parents. She was going to undertake Mr. Branscombe's copying for him—to be in fact, she said, his secretary; as Stella evidently did not care for the work which was just what she herself would like.

"Mr. Branscombe's what, my little maid?" asked her father, opening his eyes.

"His secretary," she repeated demurely.

He flung himself back in his chair and laughed aloud.

"Not if I know it!" he said. "You can go and see Stella as often as you like. There is no kind of objection to that; but you won't go on any such wild-goose errand as being the old gentleman's secretary. If he wants one let him hire one. They are to be had for the asking. Let him take Ran. He writes a capital hand, and it is just the work he would like."

"Randolph would scarcely do for Mr. Branscombe's secretary," said Hortensia with the daintiest little accent of sarcasm. "He is a dear good boy but I do not think he is quite up to *that* work."

"No? Not quite down to it you mean, my little maid," said her father, laughing again. "The old gentleman's verses are rather feeble stuff I must say for such a young son of Anak to tackle. Still it will give him something to do, and he might be at a worse crank if he could scarcely find a weaker. At all events, I will propose it; and if the cat jumps that way I will write to Ran, who would not say No. Whatever happens however, I will not have any nonsense about you, do you understand? No secretaryships, my little maid, for Mr. Branscombe or any one else."

"But why not, papa?" asked Hortensia loftily. "I could not be better employed! I could not be doing anything that would refine and elevate me more than this."

"Stuff and nonsense, my dear," he answered with good-humoured impatience. "You might be making a pudding in the kitchen or casting up the weekly bills for your mother; and that would be far more elevating, and a deal more useful, than copying out that queer rubbish which our friend at Rose Hill calls poetry. And whether or no, you don't do it, do you hear? So now there's no more to be said; and go and sing me 'Cherry Ripe' like a dear."

But Hortensia broke down before she had got half through the first verse, and cherries turned to tears in her song.

"Why, how now!" said her father. "What is this, my

little maid? You are not getting so that you cannot be thwarted, even in an absurd fancy like this, without showing silly tempers that a child should be ashamed of? Is this the right reward for all the love and indulgence with which you have been treated from the day of your birth up to now? Is this really my little maid who has grown so peevish and unpleasant?"

"I have always told you, William, that you spoil the child, and that some day you would find it out," said his wife irritably.

In general, her interference when things went wrong between father and daughter, only brought herself into disgrace; but this evening her husband felt somehow unable to cope with Hortensia's latest folly. There was something in it that puzzled and confounded him, and he was not sorry to give the reins for the moment to his wife.

"Well, take her and manage her your own way," he said, also irritably. "I think the very mischief gets into you women so that you do not know what you want nor what you ail! I wash my hands of you both, and you may go your own way for what I care. But tears or no tears, Hortensia," he added severely, "you do not make yourself Mr. Branscombe's secretary, as you choose to call it. There is something in all this that I neither like nor understand."

On which he flung himself out of the drawing-room and went to his own study in a pet—the most good-natured father in the world now really annoyed with his idolized little maid!

"Now, you have vexed papa in earnest," said Hortensia's mother, also severely.

She was not sorry to have this opportunity for unrestricted censure. Her husband stood so sturdily between her and her maternal right as well as duty—shall we add pleasure?—of rebuke, that she felt quite comfortable in having thus delegated to her her own natural task of moral castigation.

"Your temper is getting really too bad to be borne, Hortensia," she went on say. "And I foresee that you will weary even papa, who has always been so kind and indulgent to you. One silliness after the other, and tears and sobs if you are checked in a single desire! Your papa has spoilt you—that is just the truth of it!"

Hortensia made no reply. She only wept with a little more demonstration.

"Why are you crying, Hortensia? In the name of patience what is there to cry about?" said the mother sharply.

"I should like to be of use to Stella," sobbed Hortensia with unconscious hypocrisy.

Her mother looked at her narrowly.

"I think you go up to Rose Hill a great deal too much as it is," she said. "I do not approve of these tremendous friendships. They are unwholesome, and always come to bad ends. I shall try to make papa forbid this incessant running up to Mr. Branscombe's. It is too much."

"No, mamma, it is not. There is no reason why I should not go," said Hortensia with sobbing energy. "It is the only pleasure I have. Stella is my only friend."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Lyon drily. "Then I think it would be just as well if you made a friend of some one else—Mrs. Latrobe, for instance, or those good-natured Pennefather girls. It is not wise to be so very exclusive."

"Mrs. Latrobe! the Pennefathers!" said Hortensia scornfully if still tearfully. "Not two ideas among them!"

"Perhaps they are none the worse for that," said Mrs. Lyon tartly.

She had about one idea and a half on her own account, and she rather despised intellect in women as something unfeminine and inimical to good housekeeping. But she said no more, and Hortensia did not answer. Mrs. Lyon was not remarkable for wisdom, but she had sense enough to hold her peace and not give life to the special thought which had come into her mind more than once of late. She held her peace even to her husband; saying only, when they discoursed on their daughter's latest craze that night:

"You never do take my advice, William, but I most earnestly advise you to put a stop to this perpetual going up to Rose Hill. It is getting to be too much. And I do not like the idea of Randolph's being mixed up in Mr. Branscombe's affairs. It will keep up what is a very unwholesome excitement with Hortensia."

"Stuff, Cara!" said Mr. Lyon; "the child must have some amusement, and Stella Branscombe is the safest friend she could have. And it is the very thing for Ran. And if I can manage it, I will."

"Then you'll repent it," said Mrs. Lyon sharply.

"When I do I shall not blame you, Cara," retorted her husband.

They always wrangled over their daughter, and never about anything else. But Hortensia had been their one steady bone of contention ever since she began to talk and ask for sugar, which her mother forbade and her father gave. As time went on, and more than sugar came between them, the quarrels were graver in meaning and more frequent in occurrence; quarrels wherein the mother had the better sense and worse method, and where the father was amiably wrong and lovingly mischievous. If only their little maid had been content to be good, and had not aspired to be superior!

CHAPTER XXVII.

HIS SECRETARY.

It all came about as Mr. Lyon had proposed. Randolph Mackenzie was formally engaged as Mr. Branscombe's secretary, with a salary to make things business-like and to put them on a mutually honourable footing; and Stella was thus free to find such amusement as was to be had in the empty drawing-room and leafless garden. But this was better than her close confinement in that stifling studio; and at least she could now read other things beside her father's poetry, practise other pieces of music, or work with some sort of profitable earnestness, not interrupted every moment by calls on her attention which made her days like so many scattered bits of a puzzle without order or sequence, without meaning or completeness. Both poetry and music were of course grand and lovely; but she hardly dared confess it to herself—indeed she would have held it for sin had she acknowledged it—how unutterably weary she had become of them and what wonderful emptiness she found in them now!

This institution of the secretary, and the choice of the person made to fill it, pleased every one but Mrs. Lyon. Mr. Branscombe, despising Randolph personally and looking on him as an intellectual grub within which the potential butterfly was so dwarfed as to be practically dead, was yet gratified by the clearness of the grub's handwriting, by the accuracy of his copy, and by the good-nature with which he bore rebuffs. He was glad too, to have a daily and recognized link with that pretty little devotee whose worship was so sweet to his sense of superiority and in whose mental culture

he took so much delight; and he was proud to be able to say, "My Secretary," when he bid for his neighbours' praise by detailing his various achievements. Stella was glad to have Cyril's faithful friend and confidant so near to her that snatches of stolen talk on the lives of young civil servants in India were possible, if, under all the conditions of the case, not very profitable. Randolph was glad to be able to watch over Cyril's interests—against whom?—and to sun himself daily in the light of Cyril's star, and because Cyril's—only because Cyril's—his own also. Hortensia was glad that her elegant idol should put his graceful hand to the work of tilling her cousin's tardy soul—that work which she had taken on herself, and which she had found so almost impossible owing to the clayey nature of the soil. Mr. Lyon, who had his own views in keeping Randolph close under his eyes, was glad that his wish had been carried into execution and that he had found folks as reasonable as he had hoped. Only Mrs. Lyon refused to add her note to the chord of congratulation, and always maintained that it was a mistake, and time would show that it was when too late for reparation.

Of course the neighbours laughed at the affectation of the whole affair, and ridiculed the idea of that old fop wanting a secretary at all—as if he had anything to do that was of the very least importance. But then people are so ill-natured to merit. The jays peck so enviously at the nightingale!

Two results came about by this engagement of the secretary—Stella's lines of liberty were enlarged at all borders so generously as to take in even Augusta Latrobe without rebuke, and Mr. Branscombe's fount of creative energy ran curiously dry in Randolph's presence. It was not that he feared anything like hostile criticism from his grub. He would as soon have looked for a repetition of the miracle which set Balaam wondering. But he missed the stimulus of loving flattery, and he felt like a man who has been walking on a pair of stilts when suddenly brought flat-footed to the ground. In consequence of this dryness in the fount, there was a great deal more out-of-door life than hitherto, and the four friends were to be met riding and walking about the frozen country to an extent heretofore unknown to hothouse-living Finery Fred. They did not do much in the way of driving, which naturally he would have preferred as his mode of exercise when forced out of that indolent activity of his studio life. It was no pleasure to him to go in the brougham

alone with Stella; or in the carriage with Hortensia opposite to him and that big, clumsy cousin of hers by his side and opposite to Stella; or even with the two girls alone. His pleasure was in unrestricted converse with his little devotee alone, and in cultivating her mental garden free of bystanders and listeners. If he could not have this he would not have the rest. So they went out in a party of four; and Mr. Branscombe always managed to draw off with Hortensia while Randolph was left with Cyril's Star—and, because Cyril's, his own as well.

Thus, for bosom friends as they were supposed to be—friends so near and dear and so mutually necessary as to excuse her perpetual desertion of home and its duties with the little Puritan—the two girls were very little together; and the work of making Randolph's tardy soul went on at a snail's pace.

What Stella lost in Hortensia however, she gained in Hortensia's cousin—"Brother Randolph." Yes, he was just that—her dear, dear, good, trustworthy brother; unselfish, unexacting, loving her as much as she wanted to be loved and not a hair's-breadth less or more; the mere echo of her wish; the copy of her attitude; a reflection; a repetition; in no wise active for his own part, nor with feelings, ideas, sentiments of which she did not set the exact lines. That was the unspoken theory in force between Cyril's friend and Cyril's former fiancée; and both believed it to be eminently workable and standing four square on all sides. It is one of the most delightful of all the theories which women make for themselves; though alas! one of the most slippery and unstable. Nevertheless it pleases the eye till the inevitable day comes when card-houses must perforce tumble into ruins, when ropes of sea-sand fall to dust, when iridescent bubbles vanish into thin air, leaving only a tear behind. Meantime, and before the dawn of that inevitable day, it serves as a dream and an amusement, and holds the ground against others perhaps less innocent.

Randolph's brotherhood was a delightful addition to Stella's arid life; and Stella's sisterhood was even more delightful to him. How pleasant it was to see her blue eyes brighten and glisten with such manifest affection when he came into the room!—to see her look at him as if he were really her brother, and something of her very own! It was all for Cyril, of course—all her affection for him, all his

devotion to her—all for the lover from whom she had separated herself, for the chum whose lapsed interests he was so sedulously guarding. He was always telling himself this, as a piece of information specially needful to be planted fathoms deep in his mind; but he rejoiced in this reflected affection, this vicarious happiness, as much as if it had been because of himself alone; and one day when she said to him: "How glad I am that dear papa thought of making you his secretary, Randolph! I do not know what I should do without you now!" he felt his heart swell within him with such a sudden rush of joy as to be almost pain.

That fraternal relation was certainly one of the most charming things in the world, and he was one of the luckiest fellows in the world. Hortensia and Stella, two such darling girls, both like sisters to him, and both so sweet and good as to make him like a brother!—it was the happiest time of his life; and his charity covered even Mr. Branscombe, while his happiness touched his matutinal employment of writing in a fair hand, and with accurate divisions, words of which he knew no more the ultimate meaning than if they had been modern Greek or Venetian patois.

But what cold, coarse minds people have! What a hateful young ass that Bob Pennefather was when he said to him, Randolph, one day: "I say, Ran, you'll get to be spoons on Stella Branscombe if you don't look out!"

How willingly he would have given the fellow a caning on the spot for the brutality of his suspicion and the insolence of putting it into words! "Spoons" indeed! as if one can be "spoons" on one's sister, one's Star, on the treasure which one is guarding for one's friend. "Spoons!" Well, he would never be "spoons" on Gip or Pip, so the Pennefathers need not trouble themselves about him; and he would take care to make them understand that, and give them a wide berth for the future. "Spoons?" "spoons," on Stella Branscombe? Why not on Hortensia as well? The phrase fretted him like a sore and he could not forget it. He was a slow kind of creature in most things, and when he got an idea into his head he kept it for a long time and bothered himself more than was in any way necessary.

And then even Mrs. Latrobe, whom else he liked so much, even she must touch his susceptibilities, and that with a somewhat cruel hand. Why did she say to him one day

with such marked significance—"I do not think that Stella Branscombe will ever love again. She is one of the single flowering kind—one bloom and no after blossom?" Why did she look at him so fixedly when she said this, and lay such an odd emphasis on her words? Of course, Stella would never love again. He, Randolph, could not love her as he did if he did not believe her to be absolutely loyal. Fancy Stella marrying Jemmy Pennefather or one of the Cowley boys, or Sandro Kemp, or any other man alive! It was a desecration to imagine such a thing. No, she was staunch and loyal to the death; and he was her brother, because Cyril was his friend and had been her lover.

This was the staple of his morning and evening reflections and orisons while he prowled round her like a faithful watch-dog whose fidelity was incorruptible and whose watch was unremitting. Thus the time wore on, and the four oddly-matched companions kept their respective bubbles afloat, and their card-houses in the most admirable appearance of stable equilibrium.

One day Randolph's honest face had an expression in it of more than ordinary preoccupation. When he came into the room he looked at Stella as people do who have something to tell in private which they do not wish others to hear in public; while they betray the existence of a secret as plainly as if they carried it printed on a placard. He shuffled and fidgeted, and turned his eyes so continually on his employer's daughter that Mr. Branscombe himself noticed the uncomfortable uneasiness of his grub, and wondered what the deuce ailed the creature. Calling Stella to him, and fixing his spectacles rather low on his nose while he looked at her critically, his chin well up in the air, he said in a dry tone:

"My dear Stella, what is there about you to-day different from your ordinary usage? I see you attract Mr. Randolph's attention to a distracting extent. Excuse the pun. It was too obvious to be allowed to slip. What is it, Mr. Randolph, that you find rare and unusual in my daughter, hey? I see nothing."

"I am not aware of anything, sir," said Randolph, colouring like a great girl.

"Then may I ask why you gaze so intently at Miss Branscombe?" demanded Stella's father, looking over his glasses at his secretary.

"Did I look at her more than usual?" stammered Randolph.

"I think so," said Mr. Branscombe with suave severity. "If indeed you see nothing as you say on which to comment in Miss Branscombe's appearance, we will resume our interrupted occupation. My dear Stella, perhaps you will be good enough to take this Nocturne into the drawing-room where you can practise it more at your ease than here. I and Mr. Randolph will join you at luncheon. Thus I give you the whole morning for yourself and your amusement, free of all but this small duty"—with a curl on his thin lips that cut Stella to the heart. "By the way," he continued, as his daughter with a very pale face was taking up the music; "perhaps your little friend will give us the pleasure of her society at luncheon. She promised yesterday that she would come in her hat and habit to take a ride—if you should feel disposed to come. At your own pleasure, of course. Your pleasure before all other considerations," again curling his thin lips.

He had never forgiven Dr. Quigley's interference in his household affairs, and revenged on Stella the indignity of which she had been the occasion.

"I shall be delighted, papa," said Stella in a constrained voice.

She was not only hurt at her dear papa's sarcastic smile and double-edged words, but she thought it odd that Hortensia had said nothing to her yesterday about coming up to luncheon or going out for a ride—Randolph on his side thinking it odd that she had said nothing to him that morning. But no comment was made; and, feeling herself dismissed, Stella went into the drawing-room to practise the new Nocturne which was written in three flats and began with a chord in sharps.

She wondered as she stumbled her way among these musical tombs of harmony what was amiss with Randolph to-day; and then why her father had got into such an uncomfortable way of speaking to her. Something, she did not know what, was changing him towards her; some strange mildew of coldness was creeping over his tone and manner to her; some vague barrier of displeasure was slowly arising in his heart against her. She felt herself in silent disgrace and as if in some sort shut out from his affection, ever since Randolph had been engaged as his secretary. Yet why? She

loved him as much as she had always loved him, and would again, were it necessary, sacrifice her own happiness for his, as she had already done. She had done nothing that should have displeased him. And yet—was she quite whole-hearted in saying this?—seeing that she was so undutiful as to have got tired of her work for him—so wicked as to have wearied of his art to such an extent that she could no longer find beauty in his poetry, melody in his music, or charm in his pictures. Was this the meaning of it all? Had he seen her naughtiness; and was it then, her fault, not his, that he was displeased?

Meanwhile she stumbled over the notes of his latest Nocturne, while the tears gathered round her heart, as she hoped, so piteously, that papa was not turning against her; for then, what should she have left? Papa no longer caring for her, and Cyril parted from her for ever—life would be little worth having should the day ever come when that beloved father should steel his heart against her and shut her out from his affections! And mingled with this piteous hope was a wish as strong if not so pathetic, that Hortensia Lyon would not come here so often, and that she would not get about papa and flatter him so much when she did come! There was something in it all that pained and revolted her more than she could say. She did not know why; but it did. Was it because she was jealous?

What a wicked girl indeed she was getting! How she wished that she had a director who might give her good counsel and bring back her straying soul into obedience to the higher law and the ways of faithful self-sacrifice and suppression. Yet there was no one to whom she could open her heart. Brother Randolph, though so good, was so dense in all mental matters!—he never understood states of feeling. And Augusta Latrobe, though so sweet, was so fearfully reasonable! And Stella wanted some one who would be as wise as Augusta and as good as Randolph, but with more comprehension of moral difficulties than the one and with more enthusiasm for high-flying virtue than the other. In fact she wanted her Mother; and when she thought of that sweet faithful guide and love she laid her head down on the piano and sobbed, as her accompaniment to her father's soulless Nocturne. And yet she did not wish her back again. She had begun to understand now something of the hidden secret of her life.

Merry or sad, the time passes somehow, and at the luncheon-hour, Hortensia rode up to the door, equipped for the ride on which she and her elegant idol had agreed yesterday. It was against her will, against her better and wiser self, but Stella could not help being cool rather than demonstrative to her friend, who, as if to make up for some secret treachery, was more than ordinarily caressing and affectionate to her. Stella felt that she was "an awful wretch," as the modern phrase runs; but it was stronger than herself. She could not!—and she held back in an odd, angular, uncomfortable way which Hortensia took care not to notice. The relations between the two girls were getting decidedly strained; but they would last for some time yet without breaking. Girlish friendships go through a great deal of strain before they come to the breaking-point and it takes a century of quarrels before all the gold embroidery gets worn off the fabric.

The luncheon however was singularly silent; every one was more or less ill at ease and acting a part, so that the ride came as a decided relief and the four set off with curious alacrity. They went for some time all in a line, the two girls in the middle—Mr. Branscombe by his daughter and Randolph flanking Hortensia; but, as soon as they had passed through the village, Mr. Branscombe and Hortensia found themselves together, leading the way down a narrow lane where only two could ride abreast. And thus the "brother and sister" remained together.

"I wanted so much to speak to you, Miss Stella," Randolph began so soon as they were alone.

"I saw there was something. What is it?" she answered eagerly, her heart beating fast with a strange kind of expectation, as if she were afraid of some misfortune yet hopeful for some great gain.

"I have had a letter from Cyril," he said.

She looked into his face, her own as white as the linen band about her throat.

"Yes? What does he say? Is he well? Is he happy? Does he tell you anything about his life and his work? Does he ask after his friends at home?"

She spoke breathlessly, her questions falling confusedly over each other.

"He asks after all at Highwood," said Randolph. "He does not speak much of himself. Poor old fellow, I do not think he is very happy. How can he be?"

"Is he well?" she asked again.

"I suppose so. He says nothing to the contrary."

"Did he tell you what he was doing?"

"Only pig-sticking and looking out for tiger-shooting."

"Oh, that is dangerous!" she said with a shudder. "Did he say nothing else?"

"No."

"Not how he liked his work?"

"No."

"Did he tell you who were his friends out there?"

"No; oh, yes! the Whites: a Major and Mrs. White."

"Did he speak of any one here?"

"No."

"Not of one of us by name?"

She asked this in a lowered voice, hating herself for her want of dignity; but this too was stronger than herself.

"No," answered Randolph in a lowered voice and with a terribly distressed face, for he knew that this was the core of the whole matter; and that his negatives hitherto, reducing that letter as they did to a mere fact shorn of circumstances, were as nothing compared to this.

"Ah! he has forgotten us! He is right!" said Stella with irrepressible passion.

But if right, why did she burst into that tempest of weeping?—a tempest wherein all pride and reticence were swept away as straws in a Highland "spate." It was worse than folly to weep for what was not only natural but right! All the same, she did, and as if her heart would have broken with its pain.

Randolph's anguish equalled hers. She wept for Cyril's forgetfulness of the old bonds which she herself had sundered, and his eyes were dim because of her distress. But what can you do when you are on horseback in a narrow lane? He was only able to exhort her to quietness and self-control. He could not take her to his heart as he longed to do, comforting her as a brother might. He could only say: "Don't! don't, Miss Stella! Please don't cry! please don't!" as if hearts can break and piece themselves together again at will, and a girl who has made her own unhappiness can turn her tears on and off like so much bath-water at her pleasure!

She cried so passionately however, and was so thoroughly overcome, that Randolph jumped off his horse and stopped hers; then took her from the saddle and set her on a fallen tree by the way side. And then he knelt on the hard and

frozen ground before her, and said in a voice which brought her back to herself by very surprise of its intensity:

"Do you want to break my heart too, Miss Stella?"

No; she did not want to break his heart; assuredly not; her good, true, loving brother! What should she do without him? He was all that she had of her very own now that she had not Cyril and that the strange mildew of coldness was creeping over her father's manner towards her! No; she did not want to break his heart; and therefore, to avoid this terrible contingency she controlled herself into the wise and patient Stella of her normal state; dried her eyes—"pulled herself together," as he said—and mounting her horse rode off at a brisk pace to get within reasonable distance of Mr. Branscombe and Hortensia. But when they all joined forces again the lids of those big, blue eyes told Hortensia in unmistakable language that Stella had been crying—crying to cousin Randolph; and about what?

The question a little disturbed Mr. Branscombe's devotee; perhaps because her own conscience was not quite so clear as it ought to have been. She drew away from her idol and put her horse's head in line with Stella's.

"What is the matter, Stella? You have been crying," she said with a reproving air.

Girls are always hard on the tears of other girls; and though they may do a good deal in that way themselves, they generally hold themselves justified in showing the most virtuous indignation against the like weakness in their sisters.

"Nothing is the matter," said Stella with evident constraint.

Hortensia was the last person whom she could take into her confidence in this matter! Fancy confessing to *her* that she had cried bitterly because Cyril Ponsonby had not asked after his old love by name and with many questions!

"It is not fair to shut me out of your confidence as you do—not friendly, not what I deserve," said Hortensia, a little too warmly perhaps for the living saint for whom she somewhat posed.

"*You* have no right to reproach *me*, Hortensia! You make mysteries and secrets enough on your own side!" said Stella with refreshing indignation.

On this Hortensia turned her horse's head away in dudgeon, and dropped behind on pretence of asking cousin Randolph the name of a book which she had not read and of which he had never heard.

This strain was certainly increasing, the strand was getting thinner, the embroidery more bare, and the hidden split was threatening to show itself too plainly for future politic ignoring. When an elderly man, father to one and ideal to the other, is the only bond of union between two girls of the same age, things are in a bad way; and the very bond itself makes them no better.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NEW THREAD.

Christmas came, and with it the interrupted innings of that objectionable family which owned those noisy Doves as its most prominent members. The two brothers left in England came down for the vacation, and the Cowley boys came as well; the startling costumes devised and executed in the dark days of autumn were brought to light and publicity —to the scandalization of certain unfriendly critics of whom old Mrs. Morshead was the chief; and the rousing reveille at Sherrardine woke up Highwood to full and fast activity. Fortunately the weather continued fair and frosty, and skating was the order of the day, while dances and round games, snap-dragon and charades made the evenings "go" in such sort that the fun might be said to overflow at all four corners. The whole place was astir with the gaieties of the season; and the example set by the family at Sherrardine seemed infectious and to pass from house to house, like measles or whooping-cough, in orderly succession.

Even Mr. Branscombe was not proof against the contagion of this gay epidemic. Having already greatly relaxed the severity of his mourning, he relaxed it now still more because of the season and its claims. He could not, he said, throw the chill of his gloom over this joyous time; and he thought he showed his devotion to his sainted Matilda best by doing that which would be most congenial to her sentiments were she able to direct him vivâ voce. His daughter, his dear Stella, must not be too much shut up. It was touching and pretty to see her wish for isolation from the crowd, and her desire for quiet companionship with him alone. Dear child! she lived but in his sight! And of course that would be his wish also, as it was his sole source of pleasure; but he must do violence to himself that he might do good to her. There-

fore, he and his daughter would accept whatever invitations were afloat; and they even went to Sherrardine, where naturally one so elegant and artistic as Mr. Branscombe had no business to go.

But that is the worst of a country society, he said, when discussing these things with Hortensia Lyon. If you go to one place you must to all, else you make enemies by showing favour. It was all for his daughter, he repeated—to the world with bland and painful resignation; to Hortensia with an appearance of only half-concealed chagrin, chagrin very cleverly concealed and very artfully displayed—all for her pale cheeks, peaked shoulders, blue-encircled eyes, and the health which had run down so visibly, but to which the hidden disease had not yet given its name.

So it might be. We have no right to look behind a man's words for his motives; but for an unwilling sacrifice, as he made himself out to be, Mr. Branscombe was certainly what the Pennefather girls called "awfully jolly," though he was so "awfully stilted and humbugging and affected," as well. Still, he was decidedly jolly; and any one would have said that he enjoyed his sacrifice like the rest of them.

All this however, did poor Stella no appreciable good. Though not apparently so much depressed, she was just as pale and thin as ever; and not even a half-romping turn at "Sir Roger de Coverley" did more than bring the colour into her face for just so long as the exertion lasted. When her breath came back the soft pink roses in her cheeks faded into the normal pallor of her present condition, and she looked even more fragile and diaphanous than before. Dr. Quigley was looking after her in his own way, but silently. He was waiting for spring-time, and beyond; waiting until sundry things should declare themselves more plainly than at present, before he again took on himself the unauthorized direction of events. He was waiting and watching vigilantly; and for more things than one. But he took no one into his confidence, and the revelations conveyed by those keen eyes and that active brain remained his own property only, shared and suspected by none.

"Supreme!" That was Valentine Cowley's present working word—the traction-engine which drew the whole verbal load, the camel which was laden with all the separate straws of admiration. Everything of which he approved was "supreme;" and this Christmas-time Stella Branscombe, who

had always been nice, was supremest of the supreme. The truth was, Valentine Cowley had suddenly become a new man. He had fallen under influences which, as he said, had completed his being. To his former magnificent muscularity and worship of manly strength he had added a passion for blue china, Queen Anne architecture, Morris's papers, Rosetti's poems, Ruskin's prose, half-tones in blue and green, earnestness in men and tender stillness in women—with a sublime contempt for trade, luxury, the doctrine of evolution and the fourth dimension. He had met a certain man of mark—one of the leaders of this school—just as he was casting his boyish mental skin and becoming more manly and reflective; just as he was slipping like a hermit-crab from one intellectual shell to another, getting tired of play and casting about for "work" and "his life's meaning." And this man had cultivated him on his own lines and made him, intellectually, a new creature —having, as he said, completed his being, leaving him his muscles but adding thereto reverence for art and knowledge of the true meaning of poetry.

Having thus gone past the point when noisy hoydens were his chosen chums, Val had entered on the higher platform of refinement and idealistic womanhood, of saints in their sweetness, of ladies in their grace, even of blossoms tenderly blighted and delicate to the verge of sickliness. And Stella, who was just as beautiful now in the days of her pallor as she had been in those of her freshness—though beautiful in a different way, and with more soul about her, said Val—seemed to him just the kind of thing that he liked best of all, and just the person for whose appreciation nature had fitted him. Gip and Pip were still awfully jolly and awfully nice; the best girls in the world, and with the least nonsense about them that could be; but Stella Branscombe touched a higher level than they could ever aspire to reach. Gip and Pip were of the arrested, non-developing class, while for Stella all manner of spiritual progress might be expected. And Gip and Pip laughed too much and too loud, and had eyes far too bright and bold and wandering for his taste as it stood now, while Stella's sweet, low, tender tones and mi'd, sad, steadfast eyes seemed to him the very perfection of their kind.

Wherefore, after they had met once on the ice, and dipped their fingers together into the blazing brandy of snap-dragon, and laughed at the ghastliness gathered round the blue light made of the salt so liberally ladled in—after they

had waltzed till they were tired, and acted lovers in a charade—Valentine pronounced her "supreme;" and made Georgie Pennefather free of his verdict.

To which Georgie, laughing as if it were a small battery of guns fired off in salute, said in a shrill voice: "Why, Val! are you going to be one of those duffers who go in for washed-out faces and sentimental voices? I thought you had more nous in you than that! Stella Branscombe is all very well in her way; but her way was never too much of a good thing, and now it is less so than ever. I would as soon make love to a ghost at once, if I were a man, as to her. I don't know indeed but that the ghost would be the better fun of the two!"

"You incorrigible young person!" said Valentine, his gaiety a little forced.

"And you incomprehensible individual!" retorted Georgie, her rattling laugh as little really spontaneous as his smile.

A little off-room at Sherrardine opened on to the drawing-room, where, at this moment, dancing was going on. Gip and Pip always called it, in their audacious way: "The spooning-room;" and held themselves free to rally any one who might be found therein, and to assume whatever they chose beyond the patent fact of occupancy. Dancing being to Valentine, in his new character of pre-Raffaelite enthusiast, a rather vulgar and decidedly unpoetic exercise, and Stella being tired, the two were sitting quietly in a corner playing at "spillikins"—not a very intellectual game—where Stella was perpetually keeping Valentine from committing suicide by toying with the "trident" when too much involved, or for the "pipe" when certain to shake.

Since she had got over the first pain of Cyril's letter to Randolph—reading his silence as renunciation even of her memory—Stella had honestly and heroically done her best to live down her pain and to be in all things like other girls. So long as it had been a mutual heart-break between her and her lost Love she had carried her sorrow as her flag of fealty; but now when she believed herself if not absolutely forgotten—who can really forget?—yet resolutely set aside, she determined to bury that sorrow deep in her own breast, and even to do her best to make herself forget that she had other cause for active grief than that, sufficiently heavy in itself, of her dear mother's death. She knew that, for her own part, she should love Cyril all her life, and love him only. No other affection would ever take the place of this which she had

worn as her glory and now bore as her cross. But she would not go about the world as a love-lorn damsel, wearing the willow and bidding for sympathy. She would be no Blighted Being whom the gentle would pity and the cynical deride. And now that papa had thought it good for her to go again into society, she would go like any one else and force herself, at least to appear to take interest in all that went on—though she had no more real pleasure therein, and derived no more moral sustenance therefrom, than does the starving man when the typical stone is tossed into his lap for bread. Good-natured she had always been; ever ready to play chess with beginners or draughts with children; to rattle off waltzes or quadrilles for others to dance to; or to count her marriages in bésique and her points in piquet with the stupid and the old. But now she was even more good-natured and more helpful than before, if that were possible. Whenever any one was wanted to do a kind turn to others, or to do what was unpleasant to herself, Stella Branscombe came to the front and took up all the little social fardels in a row, shouldering them without a murmur. If a bore had to be got out of the way, Stella took him on her own hands and off the necks of the rest; if there were too many in a set, and some one had to give up, Stella was that some one; if an uncomfortable bit of duty had to be done in the parish, Stella was asked to do it, and she always did what she was asked. Young as she was, she was getting to hold that impersonal kind of place which belongs to the "altruistic" nature, to be a kind of youthful social fairy godmother, to whom all came for help in moments of need, and from whom no one was turned away unsatisfied.

Still, she felt that beyond all this she had to find some more absorbing occupation than even social altruism gave her—something that should make her quite forget her own trouble in the activity of serious well-doing. Helping papa had failed to console her. She never quite understood why, but she knew that it had; and she did not feel as if being a kind of drawing-room fairy godmother was the exact ultimate of her aspirations or abilities. But all this was by the bye. What she had to do in the immediate present was to make herself generally useful and universally amiable; to thrust Cyril deep, deep into the recesses of her thoughts, as far in the background as was possible; and to forget herself all round. And she fulfilled her self-imposed task to the letter.

Over his spillikins, which served as a pretence, Valentine

fixed his dark eyes on the sweet fair face before him bending over the table with all Stella Branscombe's sincerity of interest in the thing on hand. He looked at her long and ardently, then suddenly, without preface or warning, he asked in a soft sentimental kind of way:

"Tell me, Miss Branscombe, what is your ideal of life?"

Stella, who had never gone into abstruse questions of this kind, even under her father's frothy tuition, looked up with a puzzled face, and then said:

"What do you mean?"

"Your ideal of life," repeated Valentine, as if repetition were explanation, and a puzzle said twice over gave its own key in the echo.

"I do not know that I have any," she said in a pretty hesitating way, feeling dreadfully dense and silly. "I have never thought of it. I suppose we ought to do what good we can—to be as useful to others and as sincere to ourselves as is possible. I cannot give any other answer. What is your ideal? Then I shall know better what you mean by your question."

"Mine?" returned Valentine. "My ideal of life is Earnestness—the worship of the tender and the beautiful, the bringing of religiousness and spirituality into our daily doings like dear old George Herbert—striving after the better way through the culture of poetry by means of love and art."

An odd little movement of repulsion passed almost like a shudder over Stella.

"I do not think I care much for poetry," she said naïvely. "I think I like something more practical."

"Oh!" he said in aggrieved tone; "and you look the very soul of poetry in your own person! You care not for poetry, when you are made to be a man's muse, to inspire his loftiest thoughts, his noblest aspirations?"

"I sincerely hope not," said Stella with curious gravity. "I do not think that is my function at all."

"No. What then? Where does your great gift of influence lie?" he asked eagerly.

He had made a bad shot by his first guess, but, Supreme as she was, he must know in what censer he might burn his incense and by what liturgy intone his devotions.

"I am so matter-of-fact," she said, as if accusing herself of a fault. "I care so much more for realities than for all this kind of thing, as I just said. I would care to do good to the

poor, to help the sorrowful, to nurse the sick—anything of that kind—so much more than to write poetry, or even inspire it."

"You might still be practical, yet inspire the poet, and with his loftiest themes!" answered Valentine warmly. "The gracious Ladyes of the past—the sweet châtelaines who walked in their gardens and sat in their bowers—bore also the castle-keys at their girdles, and were servers of bread and leeches in their degree. The Ladye of La Garaye was the Lady Bountiful of whom you paint the outlines so delicately, so deliciously."

"But I do not think I should ever care to inspire a poet at all," persisted Stella. "A man ought to lead such a much freer and healthier and such a much more practical life than poets and artists do. To me, health and strength and energy are such grand things!"

"In man perhaps, not in woman," said Valentine in his sentimental craze for want of hæmatine and for relaxed fibre. "A woman should be a dainty, tender, delicate creature, all soul and spirit—a low-voiced, sweet-faced, fragile saint, to be taken care of by her husband to whom she should be at once his guardian angel and his charge. Her pure counsels should be his fount of inspiration and the guidance of his life, while his strength should give her service and protection."

Stella looked at her companion with frank surprise. She forgot even the "thirty" trident, at which she had been so delicately working, and which was one of the great prizes of their odd little game.

"*You* say all this?" she said. "I thought you cared only for fun and gaiety, and that what you liked best in woman was good-humour and high spirits and all that kind of thing—girls who could walk and ride and row, and were never tired and never sad, and whose whole lives were just like so much dance-music."

"No, a thousand times no!" answered Valentine with strange energy. "Women of that kind are good to laugh with, I grant. They are first-rate fun and capital fellows all through; but the Supreme to idealize and idolize is of a very different type. My ideal would be a girl, pale, slender, gentle, fair, reminding one of a lily that had been a little bowed under the weight of a passing storm; of a blush-rose, surcharged with the tears of the morning; of a saintly martyr floating in the still lake, her hair spread out like an aureole about her; of all things tender and soft and plaintive, to

whom I should minister—she demanding care because of her sublime weakness, and I, strong and reverent, proud to give her on my knees the service of my life. That is my ideal woman; and I would give her your form and features."

"Would you?" said Stella, with the most simple, the most sincere amazement. "How odd!"

Nothing being farther from her thoughts than loving, nothing was farther from her perceptions than being made love to. And if any one had told her that this was Valentine Cowley's method of making love she would have thought her informant was dreaming, or perhaps wilfully trying to deceive her.

At this moment, and before Valentine could answer, the music ceased in the drawing-room, and Randolph Mackenzie came lumbering through the doorway, bringing Gip on his arm. In their quality of hostesses she and Pip were looking after laggards and beating up partners for the next dance. Immediately behind these two came in Pip with Mil—more constant to the original type than his elder brother had shown himself to be. But then he was three years younger; he had not the steadying prospect of future inheritance and family headship to put a little moral ballast into him; and he had not yielded to the influences of Albert Jones and the love of blue china. He was still in the era of tomboys and fun. There were no flaws in the Pennefather pottery for him; he saw no beauty in saints destitute of hæmatine and with fibres all relaxed; and poetry was simple bosh, when not an uglier word still. His brother's new vein of sentimentality surprised him as much as it surprised the Doves, but he supposed he would work out of it again. If he did not, he was a good fellow spoilt, said Mil; and he wondered how he could be such a duffer as to be taken in by one who himself was nothing but a duffer all round. However that was his own affair, and if he liked it, let him go the pace till he got tired! Just now he seemed to be going the pace at a hand-gallop, to judge by his face, which was the first thing they saw as the four came surging through the doorway, Randolph and Gip leading.

"I say, you pair of spoons!" shouted Gip; "what are you doing here, when you ought to be doing your duty by Augusta Latrobe, who has been playing for us like an angel? What's the use of you both if you don't dance when you should? Spooning-time never comes till after supper!"

"One cannot be always dancing, Gip!" said Valentine a shade testily. "And Miss Branscombe was tired."

"Then Miss Branscombe might be content to be tired for herself, without carrying off one of our partners to keep her company!" said Gip with a grimace. "There's Hortensia Lyon been sitting out and little Lucy Grey and half a dozen other girls; and here are you carrying on over spillikins instead of doing your duty like a man! England expects every man to do his duty. Do you know that, Mr. Val! We don't allow laggards at Sherrardine!"

She laughed when she said this, just in her usual boisterous and extensive way; but her eyes were painfully bright and her laugh unmusically hard.

Valentine changed colour, and for a moment looked as if he were going to be angry. He seemed to think better of it however, and put on the most amiable face at his command.

"All right, Gip! I will do my duty next time like a man," he laughed; "and you shall be my Britannia!"

And at this they all laughed, as at an exquisite joke; all save Randolph Mackenzie, who looked like a man standing at the bar of the Old Bailey waiting for his sentence, and Stella, who wished that she was not so obtuse and could understand the fun which amused others so much. But the spell was broken for Valentine, the charm flown for the evening. He felt something like an enchanted prince who had been permitted to come out of that rough-skinned husk in which he was enclosed, and appear as a lovely young man for a moment; but who must now go back to his mask and his hide, and be once more the mere kitchen scrub, if not the Beast of his daily appearance. He was no longer Valentine the poetic adorer of the ideal, but Val, the chosen chum of a noisy, wild and somewhat vulgar tomboy to whose "business" he had to play, keeping in the same line as hers and with the like method.

The two sitting at the little table got up, and all six went into the drawing-room where Stella undertook to play the next set of quadrilles, and Randolph said he would turn over the leaves of her music-book. Colonel Moneypenny had just been doing the like office for Mrs. Latrobe, though indeed she had scarcely needed his assistance, seeing that her waltz had occupied only one page and there were no leaves to turn. But as suddenly as Valentine Cowley's declaration of his ideal to Stella Branscombe—as much without preface or warning—

the Colonel had abandoned his displeased attitude towards the fair-faced widow, and to-night had devoted himself to her as if no shadow of coolness had been between them. And, as taking no notice and letting things slide were the main points of Augusta's philosophy, she had accepted his attentions with the most delightful and sweet tempered forgiveness of past rudeness, and never seemed to remember that to-day had had a yesterday or might have a to-morrow.

Hortensia was sitting between her father and Mr. Branscombe, a meek and self-denying little Puritan, preferring quietness and lofty converse to all this loud and mindless gaiety. And even when a whist-table was formed, she went off with the elders, better pleased to watch a game of which she knew neither the rules nor the value of the cards, but where Mr. Branscombe was an authority, than to take part in the fun going on among the rest. With all these odd little kinks however, the rose-coloured thread of mirth and merriment ran on the whole smooth and straight; and only Randolph kept a saddened face, feeling as if his heart had leaden weights which dragged it down and made it heavy. Gip, who had got back her old playfellow, was as bright as it was her nature to be; and Pip, who had had no such twitch as had made her sister feel as if things had gone very crooked somehow within the last half-hour, was all that Pip ever was. Thus the evening passed in an apparent cloud of silver and gold floating over a sky all of blue and rose colour; and only when all the guests had gone and the two Doves were safe in their own rooms with each other was the secret displayed.

"I say, Patrick," began her sister, as she brushed her fine hair with vigour; "what did you think of Val and Stella to-night? Is it a case? Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I think he's awful nuts on her; I do indeed, George," said Pip gravely.

There was silence for a few moments.

"Those horrid quiet sly girls!" burst out Gip with strange passion. "They carry everything off and pretend they don't want to. Of all things in the world, I hate most a quiet flirt; and I am sure Stella Branscombe is a quiet flirt—I am sure of it from to-night."

"So I think, too, George; nasty mean thing," said Pip with energy. "Why cannot she be honest and above-board? —and why cannot she keep to her own spoons? We didn't interfere with Cyril when he was humbugging about; and we

don't want that long lout of a Ran, who is as much in love with her as he can be. She might leave Val and Mil to us instead of coming in with her sly ways and spoiling all our fun. They'll be no good to any one if they get spoons on a girl; and that's what will be the end, if things go on like this!"

"It is too bad of her!" returned Gip. "Girls who poach on other girls' manors deserve to be shot!"

Which was a tolerably strong sentiment for rattling Georgie Pennefather, she whose good-humour was as proverbial as her fastness, and whose amiability and vulgarity were held to be in equal measure one with the other. But when the jade winces does it not show that she is galled?

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON GUARD.

The new thread laid on the night of that little dance at Sherrardine was not suffered to lose itself in confused tangles, and knots which fastened nothing. It was very evident to Valentine Cowley that Stella's soul was not made in the way in which he held souls should go; and he set himself to the task of moulding that delicate particle according to his own ideas. It seemed to him also that it would be the most delightful thing in the world to have Stella Branscombe as his own private and particular friend—*his* soul's sister—whom he could love without fear and worship without stint, while being to her the spiritual Prometheus whom she in her turn would love and worship. Like all the world he knew that she and Cyril Ponsonby had been engaged; and, also like all the world, he could see for himself how much she had suffered through the cancelling of that engagement—the reason being as patent as the fact. And this little drama, wherein the girl had played so sad and sweet a part, filled him with the most intense desire to make up for the loss of her lover by the gift of a spiritual brother—a handsome, strong and muscular young Prometheus who would make her soul and comfort her heart.

Acting then with this ever in view, Valentine soon made himself conspicuous by the exclusive devotion which he paid to Stella Branscombe when they met in public—which was often—and by the headlong manner in which he conducted

his spiritual husbandry. He had ingratiated himself to a marvellous extent with Mr. Branscombe, who professed to find in him the Ideal Youth—Adonis in boating flannels and Antinous in cricket costume. Just such another as he himself had been at the same age, he used to say when discussing the young heir to the Cowley estates—handsome, well-born, strong and intellectual, all in one—an athlete, a poet and a modern English gentleman complete. Yes; Mr. Valentine Cowley was just such another as he himself had been and as he would have desired his son should have been, had fortune been kind enough to present him with an heir. And feeling for the young fellow as he did, he encouraged him to come to Rose Hill as often as he wished; though, strangely enough when he did come he was for the most part relegated to the care of Stella unassisted, whose soul he might make without interruption while Mr. Branscombe devoted himself to Hortensia or his Muse, as things might chance. When it was to his Muse the poor grub had a bad time of it; for, with a mind fixed on that spiritual husbandman, who to him was nothing more nor less than a poacher, Randolph was not quite up to his usual mark of mechanical accuracy; and Prospero's elegant ferule was both sharp and heavy.

Highwood began to talk, as of course was to be expected; and to laugh in its witless sleeve at the weak-backed theory of maiden constancy and broken hearts. Stella Branscombe had made fuss enough about her disappointment, they said; meaning that her health had run down and that her face had grown pale and thin; but now they all wagered—some of them their heads and others sixpences—she would pick up again and be quite herself before another month was out! One nail would drive out another in the approved way tested by centuries, they said with the cruel sneer of people who speak at random, applying general principles like quack blisters without stopping to inquire into symptoms or to search into causes.

This little sop of gossip came at a time of dearth in "ducks;" and the affair between Cyril's lost love and Gip's favourite chum began to be discussed as a foregone conclusion and evident arrangement, according to the way of people who are on low diet in the matter of their neighbour's doings. The only gossipers who scouted the idea of any grave meaning in all this attention were the Doves themselves; and they maintained that there was no more in it than there was in

the man in the moon. Val thought no more of Stella Branscombe than he did of any other good-looking girl—only she was not so good-looking after all, and had gone off no end of late! She was fairly nice to talk to, and not such a stupid as to think every man "gone" who spoke to her; and of course Val liked to talk to her. But there was no more in it than this.

All this they said in public in the loudest and clearest voices and with the wildest cascades of laughter; but in private, between themselves, they struck another note and declined the useless trouble of trying to deceive each other. During this time of her playfellow's secession Gip had enough to do to hold up her head, square her shoulders and make-believe not to mind, as a brave girl should. She had also enough to do to refrain from girding at Val for his inconstancy and twitting Stella for her slyness. But she did. She had a certain amount of maidenly pride for all her wildness, and carried her fox like a Spartan—Pip alone knowing what she hid beneath her cloak.

Randolph Mackenzie on his side was made miserable by this sentimental fancy of Val's. The guard which hitherto had been provisional became now a fact and an anxious charge. Had Stella been Cyril's portable and saleable property, given into his safe keeping till called for, and had Valentine Cowley been a burglar with skeleton keys and a dark lantern, Randolph could not have been more constant in his attendance; more vigilant in his character of preventive officer and private detective; more watchful against dangerous chances and advantages gained by boldness on the one side and granted by negligence on the other. Under the pressure of the moment the young fellow developed a keenness of perception, a craftiness of policy worthy of Machiavelli himself. He was ubiquitous and always ready; always armed at all points and prepared for every emergency. Val Cowley was ubiquitous too; so that between the two Stella was well provided with cavaliers, and she at least had no reason to complain—as Georgie Pennefather said with two burning cheeks and flashing eyes, and a jerky little toss of her curly head. Manifestations of feeling which struck Stella as odd, to say the least of it, and such as she could not quite understand.

Neither could she understand how it was that she and her father were so almost entirely separated of late. From having

kept her so close a prisoner in the studio, and so continually at work, in the first months after her dear mother's death, he had now not only ceased to desire her presence but was often even actively annoyed when she entered the Temple of the Muses—unless she brought Hortensia Lyon in her hand. He and his grub seemed to get on together in perfect harmony; and ever since Mr. Branscombe had written a little poem called "My Caliban," and Randolph had not seemed to see the personal application, Prospero had forgiven his mooncalf, having worked off his ill-humour against him according to the method of poets in general. And as, moreover, the little devotee supplied the necessary stimulus of flattery and applause, the mechanical perfection of Caliban was all that he desired. Thus Stella was one too many in the Temple, save in her quality as the assigned cause for Hortensia's daily presence; and Mr. Branscombe was not sorry when Valentine Cowley came to the front as a possible future aspirant and present lightener of so much dead-weight of duty. The education of Hortensia Lyon's extremely interesting mind and sympathetic nature, was, according to him, the work given him by Divine Providence at this moment; and as a devout believer in Direction he devoted himself with zeal to the task assigned him.

Helped by her father, Valentine Cowley was ever with Stella. In riding he was on one side of her if Randolph was on the other. In skating she somehow found herself ever between these two, each as careful of her as if she had been a costly piece of Salviati glass insufficiently packed. In the evening Val danced twice with her for once with any one else; and when she sat out or played for the rest he generally found himself sitting out too, turning over the pages of the music-book at the wrong places, or discoursing in modern terms on the supreme beauty of quietness and the precious eloquence of silence. Yet go where he would and do what he would, the lumbering form of Randolph Mackenzie ever obtruded itself like a huge iceberg between him and the sun, cooling his blood by the very force of propinquity, and making him more angry than he dared to confess or could wholly conceal. All the people talked, and even the more sensible among them assumed the truth of things whereof this was only the appearance; and the "duck" flew up to The Laurels and Mrs. Morshead, as all such ducks always did.

How that terrible old woman sitting like Bunyan's Pope

and Pagan in her easy-chair and never stirring from her home, got to know everything that was going on in the place was a standing marvel to all. But it was a fact if a wonder; and far from being behind the rest The Laurels was a kind of well-head of local gossip; and old Mrs. Morshead was the nursing mother of all the little ducks which flew.

There was something in this report of Valentine Cowley's approaching if not completed engagement with Stella Branscombe that roused Mrs. Morshead's curiosity to its extremest point. She questioned Augusta closely and did her best to draw her; but she drew blank; as she always did on such matters. The fair-faced widow had none of that love of gossip and keenness in ill-natured criticism which are such strong characteristics in women, and she preferred "not to know" rather than to help in laying the trail and setting on the hounds. She preferred too, the scolding which her ignorance was sure to bring down on her head to the consciousness that she had done an unoffending neighbour a bad turn and thrown another brand into a burning house.

"You are the most uninteresting girl I ever saw," said Mrs. Morshead pettishly, when Augusta, looking candid and ignorant, had effectually stopped her mother's curiosity and rendered her questions of no avail by answering:—"No; she knew nothing; had heard nothing; seen nothing; suspected nothing; and did not think there was anything for any one to know."—"You might be a hoodie-crow for all that you see and hear. You have no more sense than a blind puppy; I declare you have not!"

The mistress of The Laurels was a vulgar old creature for all her grand proprietorship and that stake in the county of which she was so proud. Like many ancient dames of good family in country places, she affected a certain breadth of provincialism and bygone fashions which passed for local patriotism and made her like a superior kind of peasant.

"I am very sorry, mamma," said Augusta quietly; "but you know of old that I never gossip. I am the last to hear of anything that is going on, for I never ask and no one tells me."

"A burnt child dreads the fire," said Mrs. Morshead grimly. "Your very careful and very good-natured people have generally too much of the glass-house about them to please me. I don't wonder that you don't gossip, Augusta, as you call it. Perhaps in your place I should be as careful as you are.

But then you see I have nothing to be afraid of; and people may throw stones at me as much as they like. I have no windows of my own that they can break," she added significantly.

"No, you have not," assented Augusta with matter-of-fact serenity.

Mrs. Morshead twitched her shawl; her sure sign of annoyance.

"I wish to my heart I could say so much for my daughter," she said with a curious kind of snap. "If you had followed in the footsteps of your mother, Augusta, things would have been very different from what they are."

The widow made no answer. What indeed, could she say? Had she objected, defended herself, pushed her mother to explain her meaning and then demanded proof of what she would have said, there would have been a quarrel and one of those wordy tempests which it was the great aim of Augusta's home-life to avoid. It was so far easier to slip under the harrow than to try and force those cruel teeth to take another direction, or to go back on their line and cover up its traces! Wherefore she kept silence now, as always, when her mother flung about the wild-fire of these unjust accusations; and at this moment, as her own ill-luck would have it, Stella Branscombe came into the room. Her visits had become somewhat less rare of late, since her father had given her more liberty and had taken off the interdict laid on Augusta. They were by no means frequent even now; partly because Stella was afraid of Mrs. Morshead, and partly because she did not care to appear as if she took a greedy advantage of her comparative freedom; still, they were not quite so few and far between as they had been during the late summer and autumn.

"You here alone?" said Mrs. Morshead as her greeting, lifting up her heavy old grizzled eyebrows as Stella entered.

"Yes," said Stella; "papa was busy."

"And you come without your shadow?" the old woman said, repeating her movement of surprise.

Stella smiled in a pretty, perplexed, uncertain way, and looked from the mother to the daughter.

"Who is my shadow, Mrs. Morshead?" she asked, still smiling.

"Oh, I forgot; you have two—or perhaps I should say two and a half," answered Mrs. Morshead. "That young mounte-

bank Valentine Cowley; that great lout Randolph Mackenzie; and that affected little piece of goods, Hortensia Lyon. She is your half—the other half of her belongs, by all accounts, to your father."

Mrs. Morshead said this in her grimmest way, and looked at Stella to see how she took the blow.

"At least I am richer than poor Peter Schlemil," said Stella good-temperedly. "He had none, and you say that I have three!"

"Two too many, young lady," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Young ladies should not let themselves get talked about."

"Am I talked about?" asked Stella, in her turn lifting up her eyebrows—her surprise a little more genuine than Mrs. Morshead's had been.

"You need scarcely ask such a simple question as that!" said the old woman, even more sharply than before. "A young lady who is never seen without two young men tacked to her skirts is sure to be talked about! What else can she expect? Do you think people are blind or dumb?"

"They may save themselves the trouble of talking about me!" said Stella with a flash of indignation. "People must indeed be badly off for subjects of conversation, to choose me!"

"I suppose you do as well as any one else?" retorted Mrs. Morshead. "Do you think you are sacred—not to be touched or looked at—tabooed, like a South Sea Island idol? Neither you nor any one else; and so I tell you! From the Queen on her throne to the kitchen-maid in the scullery, every woman gets talked about, more or less; only some who are imprudent a great deal more than less. And that will be your fate, Miss Stella Branscombe, if you don't look sharp and are not more careful than you are!"

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead!" cried Stella.

"Well—'oh, Mrs. Morshead,' and what then?" said the mistress of The Laurels with gruff irony. "Saying, 'oh, Mrs. Morshead,' and getting as red as a peony won't help matters when a friend is kind enough to tell you the truth. A motherless girl as you are, you should be grateful to any one who will take the trouble of trying to put you in the right way, and not set yourself against them when they are doing what they can to be of use to you."

"I did not mean to set myself against you," said Stella quietly; but the terrible old woman was in an atrociously bad

temper to-day and not to be mollified by any process known to humanity.

"Whether you meant it or not, you did it," she said crossly. "And I speak only for your good and because I respected your poor dear mother who is dead and gone, and who would have been the first to have objected to such goings on. And I am a mother myself," she added, as if giving a piece of news that clinched the argument.

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you for your good intention," was Stella's meek reply; and then Augusta cutting in with: "Where are you going, Stella? shall Tony and I come with you?" the conversation turned off at a sharp angle by Mrs. Morshead refusing to allow her daughter to go out at all—such a cold day as it was—enough to freeze that poor, dear little child to the very marrow! But Augusta never thought of her boy, poor fellow! If she wanted to do anything that would give herself pleasure, that poor, dear, little delicate creature might be scorched to a cinder or frozen to death for anything she cared. She was as strong as a horse herself, and did not seem able to understand that a young child needed care and attention. It was a ridiculous day for any one to be out in; and if Stella Branscombe took her advice she would go straight home at once, and make herself comfortable by her own warm fireside. What did she want with prancing about like this in a frost and cold enough to kill a cart-horse? Such folly! She, Mrs. Morshead, hated all this gadding about. Why could not people stay quietly at home? It was the best place for them. But well! there! she was an old-fashioned woman, born and brought up in a time when women were women and home was home, and the world had not gone mad after pleasure and gadding as it had now.

"I have promised to meet papa at Derwent Lodge. We are all going to the Broads," said Stella, as if apologizing for not obeying the terrible old woman on the spot.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Morshead drily. "I thought you said your dear papa was too busy to call here with you to-day?"

"Yes, when I came out he was," answered the girl innocently. "But he said he would be ready in half an hour and then I was to meet him. I do wish Augusta would come too!" she added, returning to the charge with a pretty coaxing kind of persistence that would have won any heart but Mrs. Morshead's. "It is really a beautiful day when you are out,

Mrs. Morshead, and not nearly so cold as it is in the house. There is no wind, and the sun is really quite warm!"

"Oh, of course!—of course it is!" Mrs. Morshead answered. "A frosty day in January, with the hills all covered with snow and the thermometer below zero, is quite mild and genial. We all know that when young ladies want to shut the house-door behind them. You can go if you like, Augusta, of course. You are not in prison in your mother's house; and you can take that poor dear child with you, if you like. You are his mother, and must do as you think best. But if he has croup or inflammation of the lungs to-night, do not blame me and do not ask me to sit up with him—that is all!"

"I think I will take the chance for the sake of the good the run will do him," said the widow cheerfully; and Mrs. Morshead, on this, gave an angry kind of grunt, and twitched her shawl with so much energy that she tore the border and somehow made it out to be Augusta's fault.

But as everything was somehow Augusta's fault, when the lines of life at The Laurels ran crosswise, one sin, more or less, did not much signify in the sum total of the year. And after her daughter had expressed her sorrow at this misfortune, had offered to mend the rent to-night and been severely scolded for her meddlesome disposition, the two young women went upstairs to Augusta's room, while she dressed herself and the child for their walk and kept laudable and unfeminine silence on the skeleton of the house below.

The only sign given by the young widow of having endured anything unpleasant was a quick little sigh as she shut the door of her bedroom, and a sudden turn to Stella, whom she kissed.

"How good of you to come for me to-day, darling!" she said with a smile which seemed less to express pleasure than to mask pain. "I was just longing for some fresh air when you came in; but my mother is in one of her most uncomfortable states to-day, and I do not think I should have got leave to go out had you not called and carried me off."

"I am so glad I came," said Stella.

And neither said anything more. They were getting to that pass of intimacy when they understood without the need of explanation.

CHAPTER XXX.

PLAIN TRUTHS.

"And yet, Stella, dearie, mamma is right—people *are* talking about you and Valentine Cowley."

Augusta said this when they had got well out of the grounds of The Laurels. She spoke abruptly, suddenly interrupting the silence that had fallen between the two since they left the house.

"Oh, Augusta, how can you be so cruel?" said Stella, startled as if out of a sleep.

What Mrs. Morshead might choose to say was only a pin-prick of no more value than the mere momentary irritation; what Augusta said was of a very different character and had to be taken as serious and important.

"No, I am not cruel; I am only telling you what you ought to know," returned Augusta. "To mamma, of course, I admitted nothing; but there can be no concealment between you and me. So I tell you the truth; and this is the truth—people *are* talking."

"But what are they saying?" cried Stella, her face on fire yet with something of terror in it too. But in general, terror blanches, not flushes.

"That you are engaged to be married to Valentine Cowley," returned Augusta as tranquilly as she would have said: "Your hat is not straight," or "a hair-pin is coming out."

"What dreadful nonsense! He has never said a word to me! He cares no more for me than he does for Hortensia Lyon, and not half so much as for Georgie Pennefather."

Stella said this with an indignant rush, as if her mere assertion were proof sufficient for all rational persons.

"As for that I think you are mistaken," said the widow quietly. "From what I have seen I am quite sure that Valentine Cowley is only biding his time and seeing what his chances are likely to be before he makes you an offer. Every one thinks this who does not think you already engaged," she added, looking at her companion.

"Augusta!"

Stella could say no more. This information came upon her with something more than surprise—with a feeling of sacrilege to Cyril's memory, of disloyalty to the past that was

almost unendurable. She felt fallen from her place of pride in her purity, and guilty of some nameless sin. She must have been to blame to make it possible for people to say such dreadful things. She must have done something wrong. And yet she had been innocent in her guilt. She had not known when or where she had sinned.

"He seems to be a very nice fellow," said Augusta, after she had given her poor friend a little time to recover herself.

She was being horridly cruel; that she knew and confessed; but love is sometimes cruel to be kind in the end, and when an operation had to be performed the most humane surgeon is he who does it with most determination. It was for Stella's good; and she must bear the smart for the sake of the future healing.

"He seems to be immensely improved this year; don't you think so?" continued Augusta.

"I have not thought much about him in any way," answered Stella with a little film of sulkiness in her manner, the result of choking back her natural inclination to cry.

Had she obeyed that natural inclination she would have sat down on the frozen snow by the road-side, and would there have given way to those tears which help women so wonderfully in their sorrow. Not being able to do this she battled with her weakness and overcame it so far as to answer rationally enough, but with just a shade of temper as her protest.

"I think he has—immensely," continued Augusta, seeing and not heeding. "I think him one of the handsomest young men I have ever seen."

"Do you?" said Stella with indifference, seeing that she was expected to say something.

"Don't you?" returned Augusta.

"I have not thought about it," repeated the girl.

"You dear little bat, you must be blind! He is splendid!" said Augusta enthusiastically. "And he will be very rich when his father dies. He is the eldest, is he not?"

"Yes; he is the eldest," said Stella.

"And his people are very wealthy, are they not?"

"I believe so; but I know nothing more than you do, Augusta!" with a decided accent of impatience. "How should I possibly know more of the Cowleys than any one else does? If you want to learn all about them why do you not ask the Pennefathers instead of me?"

The widow glanced sideways at the girl. Was craft or

boldness the best game to play with her?—careful stalking or a sweeping drive? There were so few points in her character of what Augusta would have called reasonableness, and perhaps what others might have said was worldliness, by which she could be moved to her own advantage—she allowed herself to be so completely dominated by that troublesome and inconvenient conscience backed up by her affections and her romantic ideas about constancy and the like—that it seemed almost hopeless to try and influence her to her own good. Yet—if she could be swayed; what a grand thing it would be for her!

"I wish, Stella, my darling, that you—"

The widow stopped. Should she spoil all by a premature direction?

"That I, what?" asked Stella without curiosity.

"That you could like Valentine Cowley and marry him!" said Augusta with the feeling that now she had done it!

"Augusta!"

Stella turned away with a gesture of frank abhorrence.

"Now you are not to be angry with me. I love you dearly, and I want only your happiness," said Augusta. "It would be the best thing that you could do—by far the best—to marry Valentine Cowley. If you give him the least encouragement he will ask you, and oh! Stella, dear child, accept him when he does! Take my advice—I am older and more experienced than you; you will save yourself infinite sorrow if you do as I tell you!"

"Do not say that, Augusta, please do not!" said Stella, with a kind of agony on her face. "It sounds like blasphemy to me to tell me that I am to marry any one!"

"But if Cyril has really acquiesced in your decision?—it was yours, remember, dear. He did not wish it! And men are not to be played fast and loose with at your will. If we do give them up, you know, we must expect them to take us at our words; and there is no good in looking back. To give up the substance and live on the shadow is not very wise!" she added with a hard laugh, while her cheeks with their two bright burning spots made the double application as plainly as words would have done.

"He may; and has," said Stella, her lips quivering as she spoke; "but though he may give me up in his memory, I cannot forget him! I shall never love again! never! never!" she repeated.

"Well, you know best, of course, but don't let people say you are breaking your heart for a man who has forgotten you! Wearing the willow all your life is not a very dignified kind of life, my dear. And by far the wisest thing would be to make your happiness in another direction now that the original venture has failed."

"How can you say such things, Augusta! I sometimes feel as if you were two people!" cried Stella, almost angrily. "So charming and sympathetic and sweet in some things; so hard and worldly in others!"

"So reasonable you mean, dear," the widow answered gaily; and yet her gaiety had a terribly artificial sound in it! "So opposed to all silly sentimentality, and so heartily despising weakness in all its forms. That is what you call being hard and worldly. I don't. However, good-bye for the present. Here we are at that little snake's house; for she is a snake, Stella, and so you will find out some day! I will not be seen and I must go home now. We have had our run, Tony and I, and mamma is so uncomfortable to-day, I had better go back. Good-bye, darling. Think over what I have said, and look me in the face before I go and say you are not angry with me."

For an instant Stella kept her eyes to the ground; then she raised them frankly and gave both her hands affectionately.

"No, I am not angry, dear!" she said, her own sweet tender smile about her lips while her eyes were still grave and thoughtful. "You mean well by me, I know—only we do not agree as to what is well."

"Time will show!" laughed the widow, as she turned away with her boy, a little relieved that all had ended as smoothly as it had done. She had plunged into deep waters, but she had not damaged herself nor shipwrecked the friendship which made a great part of her private happiness. And her escape from the danger to which she had voluntarily exposed herself in Stella's affections counted to her as a gain from which she would make a further step yet in advance.

Stella found them all waiting for her at Derwent Lodge—her father in his fine furred coat and general look of gloss and get up; Hortensia in her quaintly-severe dress, always with the flavour of Evangeline about her; Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, the one good-tempered, unæsthetic, rubicund, the other with that odd mixture of depression and irritation proper to wives who are sat upon by their husbands; and Randolph, with his good,

brave, honest, unintellectual face—the dear, big, human watchdog that he was! And as soon as the girl appeared the whole cavalcade set out—Hortensia between her father and her elderly idol, Stella between Mrs. Lyon and Cyril's chum.

Surely something was in the air to-day! What was it? Valentine Cowley had never pressed himself on Stella with so much evident intention of absorbing her; Georgie Pennefather, who had the trick of turning up where least expected and least desired, and who could hold on like a leech without showing that she was sticking voluntarily to her post, had never been more ubiquitous nor more tenacious; and Randolph had never shown himself more resolute in guarding Cyril's property from all chance of theft by interlopers or from the bolder robbery of burglars. It was like a game of blind-man's buff where every one was being caught against his or her will.

For one little moment on the ice Valentine got Stella to himself. Gip's skate had become unfastened, and though she had called to her old playfellow to help her, she was obliged to be content with the aid that Randolph was compelled to give in Val's wilful deafness and rapid absence.

"Do you like that great lumbering fellow, that Mackenzie?" asked handsome Val with irrepressible ill-humour.

At the moment jealousy was beyond brotherly love; and he could not employ the moment better than by slinging his stone against the watch-dog.

"Very much indeed," said Stella, trying to stop her rapid transit; adding: "Let us wait for them."

Valentine, who had her hand, took no notice of her last words. He bit his lip with vexation; bit it vigorously, as a scorpion might have stung itself; and then said sharply, disagreeably, with a sneering smile:

"And he, I suppose, is fond of you in return?"

"I hope so," said Stella with grave dignity.

"What kind of tie can there be between you, the very soul of grace and sweetness, and that great awkward fellow—that lout who has only his inches to recommend him!" said Valentine with disdain. "I should as soon have expected you to have made your favourite friend of Chang himself as of Randolph Mackenzie! These overgrown fellows have neither brains nor muscles! They are mere carrots when put to it."

Stella changed colour. She could not tell the truth and say that she liked Randolph because she had loved—had

loved?—Cyril; and Randolph had a flavour of Cyril, and brought with him the remembrance, the association of her lost love. She could not confess this; and she dared not take up the cudgels too warmly in her friend's behalf because of this in her heart. But she did say with extreme pride:

"I like him because he is honest, truthful, unselfish—because I can trust him."

"You could not say less of a dog," laughed Valentine unpleasantly. "It is the clod and the goddess over again."

"But he is not a clod and I am not a goddess," said Stella, "and do stop, Mr. Cowley! Let us wait for them."

"No, do not ask me that," he said, his manner suddenly changing. "I have so seldom the chance of seeing you alone—you are always so closely pursued by that fellow. I can never get a moment with you without witnesses and listeners!"

"Why should we not have witnesses and listeners?" repeated Stella hastily. "There are no secrets between us!"

"There may be some day," said Valentine with meaning; and Stella, enlightened by Augusta, answered with half-frightened promptitude:

"That is impossible, Mr. Cowley. I never make secrets with any one!"

And as at that instant the pursuers came up with them, heated and out of breath, Valentine could make no reply and could only look as if he had none to make.

"How awfully fast you went, you two!" cried Gip. "You looked like running away—I declare you did. I began to wonder whether Gretna Green was at the end of the Broads, didn't I, Ran?" she said, turning to Randolph and laughing till the echoes rang again.

"What kept you two back, Gip?" asked Val. "Were you spooning? I believe you were; and want to turn the tables upon innocent me!"

"No, I don't think Ran or I are gone on each other," said Gip with another laugh. "It was only my bothering skate that came loose. The horrid old strap broke. I called no end to you, but you were as deaf as a post and went on like a couple of lamplighters! I tell you, it looked just like a case of Gretna Green; and I heard a lot of people notice it."

"Georgie! how can you say such dreadful things?" cried Stella indignantly.

"Why are they dreadful?" retorted Georgie. "Do you

want to be like an ostrich, Stella, and to stick your head in a bag believing that no one sees you because you can't see yourself? Of course it looked like spoons, your flying off from us in that mad way!—and you would have been the first to say so yourself if you had seen it in any one else. But I'm sure you are quite welcome. I don't want to spoil sport. So come along, Ran, and let us leave these two to themselves. We don't want to pick gooseberries, do we?"

"Do not talk such nonsense, Georgie!" cried Stella, even more indignantly than before.

Turning to Randolph she held out her hand, making him her skating-partner and balancing-pole as if to cut short all this undesirable folly. It was not often that she looked haughty and superb; but she did at this moment—her head held high, her face flushed, her eyes dark and bright, and a new spirit altogether animating and informing her. Valentine looked at her with admiration which made his face like a book or a mirror.

"By Jove!" he said, drawing his breath as a man does when he is startled. If he had thought Stella Branscombe supreme in her sweetness he thought her still more so in her pride.

"You needn't look like that, Stella, as if you would bite my nose off!" said Gip with another peal of laughter. "I declare you and Val seem as if you were acting a charade together."

Her voice and words seemed to waken her old play-fellow from a dream. Evidently he pulled himself together, as he would have expressed it; and turning from Stella, looked at Gip at first with surprise, then with curiosity, and then as if asking something or seeking something. Suddenly he burst into a queer kind of laugh as he took her hand in his and said:

"Now, don't be savage, Gip, and satire is not your style. Come for a spin with me, and perhaps you will have got into a good temper by the end. Why, you little fury, I didn't know you had so much malice in you!" he said, as they skated off and left the causa belli standing with her watch-dog.

To which Gip answered candidly:

"Well, Val, of all things I hate a sneak about the worst. And that little Stella Branscombe is a real sneak, out and out!"

So what with Hortensia a snake, and Stella a sneak, the girlhood of Highwood had not much to congratulate itself on in the way of honesty.

Randolph, his face flushed and his eyes full of dumb reproach, stood all this time, grounded on his heels, awkwardly holding Stella's hand in his. He had none of that kind of courage which makes a man take advantage of a chance. As Gip said of him to Pip in those confidential hours when the Doves dissected their neighbours: "He could not spell opportunity to save his life." And she said the truth. Certainly, with Stella Branscombe, who was surrounded with the sanctity belonging to Cyril's property and who was his own Star—because Cyril's—he was always that step in the rear which needs direction and in a sense permission before it goes on.

"Let us go back to where papa and the Lyons are standing," said Stella; and Randolph obediently answered: "Very well, let us;" as he would have answered had she proposed anything else.

And on this they set off at a much tamer step than she had been forced to take with Valentine. As they went, Randolph, whose heart was too full to be contained in silence, broke his way out with all the frank and tactless honesty which was so specially his own.

"I was so sorry, Miss Stella, when you went off like that with young Cowley!" he said.

"I could not help it," returned Stella rather stonily.

"Georgie made such a row! The whole Broads must have heard her. I wanted you so much to turn back," said Randolph.

"What a silly girl that Georgie is!" cried Stella. "I am sure I do not want Mr. Cowley ever to speak to me again. Why does she let him? If she is so jealous of him, I wish she would keep him to herself."

"I wish he did not pay you quite so much attention," hazarded Randolph. "People are speaking of it so much; and I am sure you do not wish that, Miss Stella."

"Speaking of what? What do they say?" cried Stella, up in arms as she had been more than once to-day.

"Well, just what people do who have nothing else to say, and no brains to say it with," replied Randolph in a rather mixed way. "They say that he is in love with you—and of course it is easy to see that he is—and that you are engaged

to him; which you are not. I tell every one you are not," he added with energy.

"What a shame! what a horrid shame!" cried Stella, tears rushing into her eyes. "How I wish I could get away from Highwood!" she added with a girl's natural petulance. "It is too horrid to be made the subject of gossip and falsehood like this."

"But you are not angry with me because I have told you?" said Randolph anxiously. "It is only my duty to give you a word of warning, when I think you want it. And indeed, dear Miss Stella, you must be careful with Valentine Cowley, if you do not want people to think more than is true. I am sure you don't mind my saying this. Tell me that you don't."

"No," said Stella, making an heroic effort over herself; "I am much obliged to you. I know that you have done it for my good."

All the same she felt horribly humiliated and ill-treated by fate, fortune and humanity in general, and wished that she could run away from home to-morrow and hide herself in some inaccessible place where neither Val Cowley nor Highwood gossip could find her.

"I am going off the ice now," she said more coldly in spite of herself than usual, as she and Randolph neared the bank where her father was waiting with the Lyons.

"So soon!" he said ruefully.

"Yes, I have had quite enough of it," was her reply; and poor Randolph, feeling in disgrace, said no more.

"You have not been long, Stella," said Hortensia who wished she had stayed away longer.

"My dear, have you had enough already?" asked her father, who shared Hortensia's wish.

"Yes," said Stella, feeling herself unwelcome, being sensitive enough to feel "the sound of a shadow" at this moment.

She turned to Mrs. Lyon and put her hand within her arm. Here at least she was not one too many; and a mother was always something precious and comforting to her.

"You and young Mr. Cowley made quite a feature on the broad expanse," said Mr. Branscombe with a courtly air. "I was proud of the elegance and swiftness with which you went. It was really quite suggestive!"

"I am glad you were pleased with me, papa!" said Stella, her face brightening as she spoke. Praise from her dear papa, a little too rare in these days, was so delightful! so consoling!

"Yes, quite well pleased," returned her father. "You made really a striking couple—quite what I call a show couple!" he added with an odd expression about his mouth.

Soon after this Valentine and Gip, having finished the "spin" by which the former had bargained for the return to good-temper of the latter, came up to the little group on the bank.

"Mr. Valentine Cowley," said Mr. Branscombe in a loud artificial voice; "allow me to congratulate you on your elegance and prowess. You remind me of my own young days, and, egad, sir! once I was the crack skater of the regiment. I have never seen one who has come near me but yourself."

"Very glad, Mr. Branscombe, I am sure," said Val, pleased at the old fellow's butter—as Gip called it in private a few minutes after—because it was Stella's father who gave it.

"I shall be glad if you will come back with me and dine at Rose Hill, this evening," continued Mr. Branscombe. "I have one or two little trifles to show you that I think with your taste you will appreciate."

"Delighted, I am sure!" said Val, radiant, while Stella blushed scarlet, Randolph looked as if he had received his sentence of death, and Gip, scarcely waiting to be out of hearing, cried out to her old playfellow: "The most audacious bid I ever heard in my life. You will be green, Val, if you are taken in by that old fop!"

"Never fear, Gip," said Val with a laugh. "I know what I am about!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

"OTHER EYES."

Suddenly Highwood blazed with news of Cyril Ponsonby. Every one was talking of him; every one had his or her comments to make, his or her deductions to draw; every one had either foreseen such a chance as this from the first and was not in the least degree surprised when it came, knowing the young man's character so well!—or else, had never been so

profoundly shocked, would never have suspected that Cyril Ponsonby, such a nice fellow as he was, could have been guilty of such a thing, and would not have believed it save on such good authority as that of Jack Pennefather's. For Jack, whose tea-plantation was quite close to Cyril's station, had written home to his people what the family called an awfully jolly yarn; and among other bits of news had informed them that Cyril was quite "gone" on a pretty little woman, a Mrs. White, the wife of Captain White, of the Ninety-ninth; that he fairly lived in their bungalow; and that this little woman, who was called "Lalla Rookh" by the fellows, was never seen without Cyril lashed to her skirts. The old man was in awfully good form, continued Jack, and as lively as a cricket; always in the front of the fun and the life of the place all round. He was a dead shot at big game, and made bags that made one's mouth water; but even brave men said he was too reckless, and that some day he would come to grief no end. But though he was a good fellow enough, he was not quite on the square to carry on as he did with Lalla; for the Captain had stuck up for him, and been his friend from the first, and it did not seem quite the thing to spoon his wife in return. However, that was their own affair, said Jack, with the commendable philosophy of letting people order their own households as they would; and no one had the right to interfere if the Captain didn't object.

The lad forgot to add, or rather he himself did not stop to reflect, that perhaps there was not a word of truth in the whole of this notable report; and that if analyzed and reduced to its original basis it would probably be found of no more weight than a pinch of dust—the gossip of a small Indian station not being worth the breath consumed in repeating it. Jack said nothing of this, and no one said it for him; so the letter made a profound sensation at Highwood and on none more than the Pennefathers.

It was one thing for girls to like fun and noise, and to call their playfellows "old men," "dear boys," and by their Christian names when not by some yet more familiar nickname; and another thing for young married women to get talked about with young unmarried men! The one was legitimate; and not only legitimate but laudable as a protest against Sticks—Sticks being anything but laudable! But prancing after a young married woman—spooning another man's wife—ugh! that was ugly, and wicked, and shameful;

and both Gip and Pip, wild little pusses as they were, got red with genuine indignation when they spoke of it. This creature, this Mrs. White, ought to be cut for a little wretch who wanted more than her share; and Cyril Ponsonby deserved a thrashing to bring him to a sense of good manners. As he was the one known to the Highwood community, while Mrs. White was only a name, he got the severer half of the punishment. Had it been the other way—or had Mrs. White been known too—she would have come in for more than her "thirds," while the man would have been perhaps pitied as the victim of her wiles.

The place echoed so loudly with indignation at this report of Cyril's misdeeds, that, of course, it came to Stella's ears. There are never wanting good-natured people to tell you of what will wound you to hear; and the society at Highwood was no exception to the rule. If no one else had enlightened her, Gip and Pip would have been sure to have carried both matches and candle. As it was, she heard the news from every one, as it seemed to her, at once; though the shock was softened by Augusta making herself the first medium of communication, and telling her what she knew would be so much anguish to hear, with some regard to humanity in the method. For though Stella did not agree with Augusta in her views of life and common-sense conduct—did not follow her advice and thought that advice all wrong—still they were true and loving friends and held closely together. The widow had too much reasonableness, Stella too much sweetness, and both too much mutual affection, to quarrel with each other for a difference of opinion. As neither could prove herself right, each therefore must be allowed to think as she would; and fights in the air are stupid things to wage.

"I knew that you will hear it from others, so I thought I would be the first to tell you. You would bear it better from me because you know how much I love and feel for you," said Augusta kindly.

She had come up to Rose Hill on a cold, damp, drizzling day—one of those days of chilling thaw which rots the ice and turns the snow to muddy slush, but which bring no sense of warmth or release—simply to warn her friend of the trial that was before her.

Stella held by her flag of fealty to the one whom she had loved.

"I do not believe it," she said simply; her disclaimer so essential a confession of love as well as of faith.

"It may be exaggerated—I dare say it is; but there must be some groundwork," said Augusta. "There is no smoke without fire, dear Stella."

"He is not that kind of man; I know him better than this," said Stella, sticking to her point. "He cannot have changed in such a short time; and I know what his principles were."

"Still, a man's character comes out only under trial," urged the widow. "It makes all the difference whether he is happy or unhappy, tried or not tried. Many of us who do perfectly well if things go right with us fall utterly to pieces—go headlong to ruin when they go wrong. And Cyril Ponsonby may be of that kind, you know, dear. We cannot tell yet."

"Then in that case it is I who have ruined him body and soul," said Stella, covering her face.

Augusta looked at her for a moment in silence. Another woman would have said: "Did I not advise you to marry him? And if you had taken my advice would not all this have been spared both to you and to him?" But Augusta was not like other women in things of this kind, and at all times cared more for the establishment of a principle than for self-glory or justification. After a little time of silence, she said, gently:

"There is no good in going back on our actions. You did what you thought best at the time. Let the rest go. If the story is true as it stands it only shows that Cyril was essentially weak, and you have had an escape."

Stella did not answer, but she thought within herself, as a woman naturally would think: "No, it only shows that he loved me, and that I have ruined him!"

"But now, darling," said Augusta; "be brave to the world. Let no one see that you suffer, and do not defend him too warmly. Just listen in silence, without saying anything one way or the other. Be inscrutable. Do not give the faintest indication of what you feel. That is the best armour for a woman to wear—a smooth surface, but as impenetrable as it is smooth."

"I do not think I can bear to hear him slandered without defending him," said Stella with quivering lips.

"Then all the world will say that you are in love with him,

Stella." said Augusta, the lightest little accent of scorn lying in her voice.

"They may, if they like," said Stella.

"And you do not object to the appearance of caring for a man who has ceased to care for you? Whether you broke off the engagement or not, at all events he has shown that he has forgotten you and has consoled himself with some one else."

"I defend him as a friend; and he has not consoled himself," said Stella, with more fidelity than logic.

The widow went over to where she was sitting, and laid her hands on her shoulders.

"Stella, dear child, I cannot bear that you should make this frightful mistake!" she cried, speaking so earnestly that the blood came into her face like fire and her grey eyes glistened and grew dark. "I know the world so much better than you do, and I know too, what idle and ill-natured people are capable of saying. I cannot have you jeered at by all the foolish and slanderous tongues in Highwood. You must not; you must not, indeed!"

"Must not what, Augusta?" asked Stella, laying her hands in turn on her friend's arms.

"Defend Cyril Ponsonby," said Augusta.

"I cannot hear him slandered and not defend him," answered Stella gravely. "That would be too base, and cowardly!"

"That conscience again!" half sighed the widow. "It is a troublesome possession to you, my dear."

"I would rather have the trouble of it than be without it," said Stella; and Augusta said no more.

They were on such different planes of principles, she thought there was no use in trying to bring things together. They must be content to mutually love and respect each other for what was worthy to be loved and respected in each; and they must let the rest go. Discretion ranked with Augusta as the greatest social virtue; duty was to Stella the epitome of the whole world of morals. There was no middle term between the two; and each must work out her own redemption her own way. But though Augusta had not done all that she had hoped to do in thus making herself the bearer of ill-tidings, she had done something. She had put Stella on her guard against a sudden shock from others; and had thus saved from unnecessary pain and damaging self-betrayal the

girl with whom she said to herself twenty times a day she was really too angry to care what became of her, and for whom she felt that irrepressible respect which the conscientious and truthful perforce inspire.

"Well! you must act as you think best, of course, dear." Augusta said, throwing up the game. "We are different; and must be content to remain so. Nothing would humiliate me so much as to be thought in love with a man who no longer cared for me."

"And I would rather people said that of me than that I should seem to believe a slander and join in disparagement of a friend—whom I respect," said Stella.

On this the widow kissed her and talked of something else. But when they parted at the house door—Stella going into the hall with her friend to help her to fasten her waterproof, and to see that she was as well protected from the weather as was possible—standing face to face for the last words, Stella threw her arms round the widow and said with a sudden outburst of feeling which swept away every vestige of misunderstanding:

"You are the kindest, dearest, wisest woman in the world!"

To which Augusta answered:

"And you have the best heart, my darling; but we will not speak about the dear head!—God bless it!"

By which it may be seen that they parted on more than ordinarily amicable terms, and that the difference in their moral standpoints made no difference in their mutual affection.

That evening there was to be a charade-party at the Lyons', and, of course, both the Branscombes and the Pennefathers were there. It was just one of the ordinary evening-parties so frequent at this time, when every one in the place was invited and no one dreamed of refusing; and apparently there was no point of difference between this or any other. And yet there was a difference; and every one felt as if society had put on a new dress and the diamond had received another facet; as if the curtain had risen on a new act and at least one of the actresses had to appear in an untried character.

How would she look? how would she bear herself? Poor thing! said some, it would be a trial for her; but others sniffed at the word, and said: "Trial! How should it be a trial to her when she was carrying on a flirtation on her own side, and probably was at this moment engaged to that young

Mr. Cowley? Did a girl want all the world at her feet, and that one man should be sighing his heart out for her in India while another was making love to her in England? Trial! what trial could there be for her in hearing that Cyril Ponsonby was making a fool of himself and worse, out there? She had thrown him over; so she had nothing to say!"

Nevertheless, they were all on the very tiptoe of expectation, and each wondered who would launch the first thunderbolt and who cast the first stone.

They were standing grouped about the room, as people do in evening-parties before they have settled down to the work of the hour. Stella and Augusta were side by side, and talking to them were Valentine Cowley and Colonel Moneypenny. The twins were at the farther end of the room, arranging with their brothers, Milford Cowley and one or two more, about the charades. For though it was the Lyons' party and the Lyons' house the Pennefathers were the moving spirits, as they always were in matters of fun and gaiety. Presently Val and Augusta were wanted for the green-room.

"I'll go for them," said Gip, her bright eyes looking a little dangerous and her manner somewhat that of a Bedouin, a Bashi-Bazouk, or what one will of aggessive and determined, with the victim within sight and the plan of attack prepared.

Going across the room she broke into the little circle.

"Augusta, dear, we want you." she said very prettily—for noisy Georgie Pennefather quite sweetly indeed; "and you, Val, we want you too, if you can possibly tear yourselves away from Stella Branscombe's skirts. Will you give him leave to come and act with us, Stella?" she added with a loud laugh.

It was so little in her way to be ill-natured that even now, when she had stung herself into this sharp hostility to her old chum's latest realization of the Supreme in Woman, she was obliged to retain her old manner—though it was only manner; the informing spirit and impulse being something quite different.

"What are you going to trot out, Gip?" asked Val, a certain look of insolence in his studied nonchalance.

"Oh! I can't give the word, you know," said Gip with another laugh. "That would be telling. You have to sing a song, though—Lover's 'What would you do, love?' Oh, by the bye, Stella," she added, turning suddenly to the girl, and

speaking in a loud, clear, ringing voice, which all the room could hear; "talking of 'other eyes,' have you heard of your old flame, Cyril Ponsonby, how he is spooning a young married woman—and the wife too of the man who has been kindest of all to him at the station? Isn't it a shame? Don't you think it horrid?"

The curtain had drawn up and the new act of the drama had begun. There was a dead silence among the guests. Mr. Branscombe, who had heard nothing of Cyril's misdemeanour before this moment, was startled, and looked at his daughter quite naturally, not having had time to take up an attitude or to put himself into any kind of moral pose. He was anxious to see how Stella would bear herself, but he did not feel able to give her any note of direction. She must get out of the scrape in the best way she could, and only when it was all over would he come in with his final flourish. Randolph Mackenzie, near Hortensia, turned all manner of colours, his whole being thrilled with pain for Stella and with indignation against Georgie Pennefather; and Hortensia's prim little face became rigid and rather red, as befitted a tender-souled and virtuous Evangeline before whom naughty subjects were discussed. For the rest, they merely held their breath and listened; while Dr. Quigley, appearing to be absorbed in a book of photographs, kept his eyes fixed on Stella, looking up sideways from under his bushy brows.

"It would be very dreadful indeed if it were true," said Stella in a low but perfectly distinct voice, standing there with her head slightly bent and her eyes fixed and steady, a little too self-composed and nerved for perfect simplicity of parry. She was evidently prepared for the attack and was not taken by surprise.

"Oh! it is true enough! Jack knows all about it," said Gip. "And hasn't he made good use of his time, just? He has not worn the willow for those he left behind him, whatever other people may have done! But after all, wearing the willow is out of fashion now, isn't it, Stella?"

Again a wild, forced, rude kind of laugh gave extra point and meaning to her words; and again the room heard and understood and watched in silence for more to come.

"Is it?" said Stella quietly. "I suppose constancy—for that is what you mean by wearing the willow, is it not?—is as much the fashion now as it ever was with some, and as little so with others."

"Those 'some' don't lodge here," said Gip.

"Do they not?" said Stella, with an admirable appearance of sublime indifference.

"I don't think *you* need ask," said Georgie Pennefather sharply, glancing at Valentine, her bold black eyes showering down on him an infinitude of fiery reproach.

"No?" said Stella. "The whole question does not belong to me in any way. I have nothing to do with it."

Georgie was baffled. She had been cut by that impenetrable smoothness which causes all the arrows to glance off into space and turns the point of all the spears; and even she, reckless as she was, dared not cast conventional politeness so entirely to the winds as to attack at too close quarters the girl of whom she was jealous.

"At all events," she said, going back to the point which she knew to be vulnerable, though she could not see the wound; "at all events, Cyril Ponsonby has shown what he is made of. He cannot lay claim to constancy, or even to common honour. A man spooning a young married woman. Horrible! Disgraceful! At least I think so if you don't, Stella!"

"I should think so too if I believed it to be true," said Stella. "But I do not believe it," she repeated, this time even more firmly than before.

Augusta touched her foot in warning; Mr. Branscombe twisted his moustache in a nervous and irritated manner; Colonel Moneypenny bent over to Augusta Latrobe and whispered:

"What a noble creature! How few would do as she has dared to do!"

But in saying this he thought of himself and the fair widow's advocacy of him and belief in him, should he be attacked in her presence and slandered in his own absence. He did not think of Sandro Kemp, say; nor would he have called it noble in her had she defended that obnoxious designer of walls and ceilings had he been vilified, however unjustly. Valentine Cowley bit his lip as his manner was when annoyed; and very heartily in his own mind consigned Cyril Ponsonby and Georgie Pennefather to the infernal deities together. Dr. Quigley, still watching and looking, made up his mind as to the meaning of the whole affair; and Randolph had a curiously mixed feeling of admiration, sympathy, sorrow—and something quite undefinable to himself—some-

thing that made him rejoice at Val Cowley's discomfiture and yet sorry and disappointed somehow; but why he did not know and could not for the life of him understand. Meanwhile Stella stood there quite quietly, alone in her advocacy and yet quite sufficiently supported by her lover and her courage.

Then Dr. Quigley came up to her and said in a slow, measured way:

"You are quite right, Miss Stella, not to believe ill words of an old friend. I don't believe a word of it all! There is some mistake somewhere; or it is merely the ordinary gossip of a small station where people have nothing better to do than pick holes in each other's coats and make nothing into something. Cyril Ponsonby was not the fellow to make love to another man's wife."

"No, he is not," said Randolph from the other side of the room. "The story is either a mistake or an exaggeration. I am sure of that!".

Her two supporters nearly broke down Stella's guard. She had borne both loneliness and opposition in her advocacy, but when it came to help and the rallying of shield-bearers she was nearly overcome. Still she had to control herself for pride's sake; and she did manage to keep her face set as before. And then others, who had been taken by surprise in the beginning and who had held their breath in expectation of the drama to come, began to talk among themselves, as people will, no matter what is afloat, after the first few moments of silent excitement. The sharpness of the interest was blunted by the inevitable egoism of human nature, and the whole thing passed off into the noise and movement of an ordinary evening-party.

But when they were arranging their charades, Val said to Gip, in a kind of aside:

"I did not think you had it in you, Gip! If any one had told me I would have denied it on your behalf!"

"What?" asked Gip, with the most innocent manner in the world.

"Such abominable cruelty! I hate to see such cruelty from one girl to another! It was really too mean of you to take such an advantage. I could not understand you, Gip. I do not understand you!"

Valentine spoke hurriedly, with scarcely suppressed excitement and evident annoyance of a graver kind than the occa-

sion seemed to warrant, seeing that he was originally Gip's friend and only a later adherent of Stella's.

"You will take her part, of course," said Gip, with an odd mixture of defiance and discomfort.

Valentine turned his eyes right into hers.

"Any one would take her part," he answered.

"Oh, if you are as much gone as that, I have no more to say!" said Gip, with flashing eyes and a little quiver about her lips. "I didn't know that you had come spoons as far as that."

"Nonsense, Gip! And you know it is nonsense! It has nothing to do with being gone or coming spoons," said Valentine angrily. "It was simply a case of ordinary feeling —ordinary womanly delicacy of compassion. It was an unprovoked attack from first to last, and I can only say I am sorry for it. I would not have believed such a thing of you unless I had heard it with my own ears."

And on this he turned away, while Gip's quick-beating heart said: Did I do wrong?" the faintest echo of a "Yes," whispered by her conscience, breaking through the louder "No" of her jealousy and wrath. That yes would have had to be spoken in a far more distinct voice before she would have been brought to the grace of penitence and the nobility of confession. Crying "peccavi" and "mea culpa" was not much in Georgie Pennefather's experience. Up to now she had never been so deeply stirred as to be led to do a serious wrong. Her peccadilloes hitherto had been of a very insignificant and superficial kind; and it was easy to say: "I'm awfully sorry!" for a mistake which had not been intended and which had not been very damaging when made. When it came to the acknowledgment of evil thoughts, and repentance for a cruel action, that was another matter altogether. The smoke of the battle must clear away before you can bury your dead; and passions must be subdued before you can feel that you have wronged another while under their influence, and so come into the clearer light of consciousness of sin and avowal of your fault.

There was however just so much sense of wrong-doing in Gip as to make her say that night, when she and Pip, in blue slippers and crimson-flannel dressing-gowns, were talking over the events of the evening:

"Was I a brute to Stella, Patrick? I was wild against her!—but was I a brute?"

"Well, you were a little rough on her, I must say," said Pip, with the air of one who is sorry to condemn, but who cannot help herself.

"If I was, she is a sneak and deserved it," said Gip, tearing at her embroidery with vigour.

Then she burst into a furious fit of crying, alternating with a wild and harsh kind of laughter which frightened Pattie, and made her think that her twin Dove had gone mad. But this unwonted hysterical attack soon passed; and after they had both agreed that Stella was a sneak as Gip had said, and that Val was an awful idiot to be taken in by her, and that it was downright horrid in a girl to pretend to be constant to one man when she was doing everything she could to get hold of another, they felt a great deal easier in their minds. All the same, Pattie repeated, sorrowfully:

"But you were awfully rough on her, George, and I was sorry; for it is such awfully bad form, you know, to be nasty like that before such a lot of people!"

To which Georgie answered with an evanescent glance of repentance on her flushed little face:

"I'm awfully sorry if I gave it her too hot; she deserved it; but I did not want to be a brute."

"But you were," said Pattie with grave regret.

"If I was, Val slated me hard enough. So we may cry quits over that!" said Gip, her gleam of repentance passing into space and her naughty passions once more triumphant.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

The only effect which Georgie Pennefather's ill-timed attack had on Valentine Cowley was to make him still more tenderly devoted to Stella, and doubly anxious to take that place of spiritual brother which conceals so much more than it confesses and gives so much more than it asks. So far the poor Dove had taken nothing, and had lost a great deal, by her imprudent outburst; but after that first "slating," as the vulgar little creature called it, Valentine said no more, and cut the ground of complaint from under the feet of his former playfellow by his almost rude rollick, his rough gaiety when they were together. It was rollick that was forced and

gaiety that was assumed; and Gip, who was by no means remarkable for either sensitiveness or perspicuity, saw through the veil and resented the attempt to blind her She was scarcely like herself in these later days: and from the most easy-going, joyous, unconcerned kind of modern slang-loving Thalia, developed into a very fury, always more or less in a bad humour and alternating between shrill impertinence and gloomy sulks. She made even her own family feel the sudden change that had been wrought in her—a change for which Valentine Cowley alone was responsible, and the effect of which should by rights have been confined to him. But she was too sore, poor little creature, to be wise or just; and the fox which she had carried so bravely in the beginning had by now leaped out and shown his cruel muzzle to more than one onlooker.

As far as Stella herself was concerned, she would have been rejoiced to have given back her chum to curly-headed Gip, and to have freed herself from the shaping hand of her would-be Prometheus. Yet how could she? Mr. Branscombe's admiration for this Ideal Youth—himself restored to adolescence—was so openly expressed and so strongly marked, his invitations were so frequent and so warmly given, and his occupations so unfortunately peremptory when the young fellow did come to Rose Hill, that Stella was thrown more and more in Valentine's way and with less than ever of outside interference. All Highwood said that it was a case, and Miss Stella was doing better than might have been expected for a young lady who had been publicly engaged and as publicly cast aside; but some more astute shook their heads and said: "No; that was not it. It was the father not the daughter—a case of settlements not of inconstancy."

The one who suffered most of all—even more than Stella—was poor Randolph. He was miserable and almost without knowing why. He could scarcely flatter himself that he was Cyril's lieutenant, holding the ground sacred because his friend had planted there his flag. After all that had been said by Jack Pennefather—with that axiom about fire and smoke echoing in his ears—and after the unsatisfactory and reckless letters which he himself had received, he could not pretend to believe that the thing had any life in it now, or that the future had any hope. Nevertheless, he gloomed and watched, and wondered about that would-be Prometheus and

his version of Psyche, with a ferocious kind of care which more than once brought him into trouble. It made Valentine furious and Stella embarrassed, and brought down on his intrusive pate Mr. Branscombe's elegant ferule with a force that made even the poor grub smart. But nothing in the way of castigation had any lasting effect on him. He was still the jostling and ubiquitous watch-dog to the office of which he had devoted himself; and if at times he embarrassed Stella, at times he helped and protected her. And one success wiped off the score of twenty failures. When he saw the dear troubled eyes brighten as he came into the room, where she sat alone with Valentine, listening to love so thinly disguised as to be recognized even by her—anxious as she was not to hear and not to see—he felt then that he had established his claim and given a reason for his existence. If she had really wanted Val Cowley's attentions, he would have been broken-hearted and he would have retired. He should have lost his faith in her, and by her in womankind in general, but he would not have stood in her way. As things were, with the troubled eyes becoming bright when he entered and interrupted, he was satisfied with himself and full of determination to go on as he had begun.

One day, indeed, he went so far as to leave his "work" for the sake of cutting short a tête-à-tête which he knew was taking place in the drawing-room. And when he went in, making a foolish and very transparent pretext of wanting something that did not exist, Stella was so evidently relieved, so frankly glad and grateful for his coming, that the poor fellow turned redder than usual with delight; and if Miss Stella at that moment had asked him to die for her he would have performed Hari-Kari as a short cut to Paradise.

Valentine almost gnashed his teeth with anger at the intrusion. He had been working up to his point with admirable skill and artistry, and it was annoying to have all his clever approaches trodden down and scattered under the huge foot of this stupid son of Anak! Little Randolph cared for the black looks and flaming eyes of the baffled besieger! He had helped and relieved the dear, half-frightened besieged, and that was his reward. But his fingers were well rapped by his employer, who soon came to look for him and carry him back to his grind, and who made the rest of the morning uncomfortable enough.

All the same, those artistic approaches were destroyed for the present; and Stella was able to prevent their immediate reconstruction.

She made it evident to Val in her own quiet way, that anything definite would be premature and a dead failure. His only chance lay in his spiritual fraternity; in his keeping his disguise so close that she should cease to fear the possibility of a new revelation; in accustoming her to him as a pleasant and innocuous fact in her life. When habit had welded this fact thoroughly into the substance of her days, and had made it part of her thoughts and one with her doings, then he might come out of his husk, throw aside his disguise, and carry his point by the very force of habit. A woman will give to a man who has made himself a necessary friend, what she would have denied to the lover; and Valentine knew this as a theory which he designed to test by practice. This then, was his scheme; and on paper and in potentialities it stood fair and firm.

The visit of the Cowley boys to Highwood was drawing to a close, but Stella's soul was still incomplete and her fidelity to Cyril unshaken. Val would scarcely flatter himself that he had done much, but he knew that he had done something; and the rest would come in time. Meanwhile, in the frankest and most gentlemanlike way possible, he asked Mr. Branscombe's consent to a correspondence which was to do Stella some unknown and undesignated "good;" and in the frankest and most gentlemanlike way possible Mr. Branscombe gave that consent and hoped that his dear child would profit by the chance. So far the young fellow cleverly enough kept the place open and the future in hand.

And then the brothers went off to spend the second half of the vacation at their own home; and Val's letters were so frequent and so long, so full of questions to be answered and of subjects to be discussed, they took almost as much of Stella's time as Cyril's had done. Stella took care to make them household property, and to let Val know that she threw them over to her father even before reading them herself. She would have cut the whole thing short had she done as she would; but Mr. Branscombe insisted on the correspondence for the sake of that mysterious "good" which was to accrue to her mind and nature. As there was really nothing which ought to either frighten or revolt her, she was forced to let matters take their course, and to submit to a corre-

spondence which seemed to her in some sort a desecration of the past if of no evil in the present.

Not having much to do of any kind, and nothing that was absorbing, Colonel Moneypenny gave a great deal of time and attention to his neighbours; and this little drama of Stella Branscombe's, with the unanswered questions: "Would she be faithful to Cyril's memory?"—or, "Would she console herself with Valentine Cowley?" interested him almost as much as if it had been his own private and personal affair. He professed himself charmed with Stella Branscombe, though he did not say which way he wished her to take; and he envied the young fellows their chances which ever way she went. She was a delightful girl and worth any man's money; and so he said to Augusta, with a little sparkle of malice in his deep-set eyes, watching to see how she would take praises of such unstinted warmth for one who had evidently the trick of winning men's love. When a girl, in a country-place where young men are precious by their rarity, could boast of one lover, one aspirant and one watch-dog, she may be marked dangerous and a fit subject for other girls' jealousy. But so was Augusta dangerous, in just the same way and to exactly the same degree. If Stella had three marked off to her share, the widow had found the same number, including himself in Valentine Cowley's place; with the poor dead husband to balance the exiled lover; and Sandro Kemp keeping even step with Randolph Mackenzie. Yet not quite even—Sandro was a burnt-out sky-rocket, and Randolph was a watch-dog in situ. But the burnt-out sky-rocket was the more dangerous of the two!

"She really is a most charming girl," the Colonel said, the malicious light of exaggeration flashing over his sincerity; "and she will some day make some man supremely happy. I know no one better able to make a man thoroughly happy than Miss Stella Branscombe."

"She has no business to make any man happy, unless it is Cyril Ponsonby; and that will never be!" said Mrs. Morshead tartly. "She was as good as married—engaged in the face of the world as she was and with all her wedding-things ordered! If the young hussy marries, I say she will be just as bad as if she were a widow; and I hope she has too much good feeling and too much modesty to do such a thing. I think too well of her, Colonel Moneypenny, to suppose it possible; though they have talked of this young Cowley, and of that long

Randolph Mackenzie too! I don't believe a word of either—not a word. And so I have always said. Have I not, Augusta?"

"Have you, mamma?" asked the widow sweetly, in the voice that meant assent.

"Have I? Why of course I have!" snapped Mrs. Morshead sharply.

Colonel Moneypenny twisted his moustache with his long nervous fingers, and flushed, as he always did when annoyed.

"I think you are a little severe, Mrs. Morshead," he said in an irritable voice.

"No; I am not severe at all," the terrible old woman answered. "If I, and such as I, did not keep people straight, where would society go to I should like to know? Severe! I am a great deal too lenient; that is what it is—not the other way."

"Do you share your mother's views?" asked the Colonel, turning to Augusta rather abruptly.

The widow looked sweet, mindless, tranquil; and yet her cheeks had that pretty pink glow which marked a state of internal excitement well covered down and concealed.

"It is a difficult question," she said quietly.

"Difficult! Where is the difficulty, I should like to know!" said Mrs. Morshead. "It is as plain as a turnpike road! Where is the difficulty, Augusta?"

"In the children," answered her daughter.

"Not in the woman?" asked the Colonel quickly.

"More in the children," she replied. "A good stepmother or a good stepfather is so difficult to find!"

She looked into the Colonel's face as she said this, her calm and candid eyes as expressionless, as free from consciousness as if they had been a doll's.

"And I say it is in the woman," said Mrs. Morshead. "A second marriage is not a bit better than heathen vice and polygamy!"

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead!" remonstrated the Colonel.

"Well, Colonel Moneypenny, I think I ought to know when I have been a widow myself these twelve years and more!" said Mrs. Morshead in a thin voice; and Colonel Moneypenny, not to be beaten, answered back:

"I don't see how that affects the question, Mrs. Morshead. I have been a widower these twenty-two years, and I don't see the sin of marrying again."

"It would be more to your credit, perhaps, if you did," snapped the old woman; and her voice and eyes and manner

again sent the blood into the Colonel's face—and kept it there.

A day or two after this little brush with his generally concordant gossip, Colonel Moneypenny called again at The Laurels on some frivolous pretence about the next meeting of the book-lending society, with which neither Mrs. Morshead nor Augusta had anything whatever to do. He brought a showy toy for Tony—it was not an expensive one, extravagance being dead against the Colonel's principles; and he gave it with a curious parade of consciousness in well-doing and bashfulness combined. It was the first time in his life that he had done such a thing; and when he handed the toy waggon to Augusta he felt as awkward and embarrassed as a girl when she receives her first offer and does not love the man. Then he graciously inquired of the fair widow if she would like her little fellow to ride his pony? His groom should hold him on, and every care should be taken of him. If she wanted him to have a good seat she could not begin too early with him; and he would be very glad to see that he was taught well. Hitherto he had thought of the boy only as a hindrance and a nuisance; now he gave him the place of a medium and association. He was so very pressing in his offers of service, so very paternal and thoughtful, that he showed his hand too plainly and let Mrs. Morshead into the secret of his play.

"Is that old fool making up to you, Augusta?" she said sharply, when he left. "What a tiresome girl you are, to be sure!" she added. "It is all your fault; and I am sure I do not know how you do it. First one and then another—I have no peace in my life with you!"

"Well, mamma, I do not see what I do that should annoy you," said Augusta with tranquil unconcern.

"You do everything," replied Mrs. Morshead. "I think all you young women in Highwood have taken leave of the few senses Providence ever gave you to go on with. There is Stella Branscombe and Cyril Ponsonby; Stella Branscombe and that young Cowley; Stella Branscombe and that long Randolph Mackenzie; and you and all the men you can get hold of. It is horrible. Nothing but flirting and marrying, or wanting to get married! It is downright indecent; I declare it is!"

"It is the old, old story, mamma," said Augusta imprudently.

"The old, old rubbish! That's what it is!" growled her mother savagely. "Let me catch you at it, Augusta, that's all! I'll soon teach you what the old, old story means! Have you lost *all* your dignity, *all* your modesty, I want to know? You are nothing better than a mere light-o'-love, that is what you are! Flirting here and flirting there, and you a widow, who should be in weeds and with a decent cap on your head, instead of with nothing at all and your hair like a girl. You are shameful; and no more fit to be the mother of that dear, little fatherless boy than if you were sixteen. I am sick and tired of it all; I declare I am; and I almost wish that you would marry so that I might be at peace for the rest of my days!"

"Do you, mamma?" said Augusta, rising with that same sudden excitement almost fierceness of face which her mother had seen in her before, if so rarely, and once to such disastrous results. It was the face which betokened such a strong stirring of the usually quiet waters, that it both angered and frightened the old woman.

"Don't look like that at me!" she said harshly. "I won't be looked at like that, Augusta, as if you were going to strike me! Leave the room, Miss, until you can behave yourself as you ought; and be thankful that I do not say leave the house for a bad, wicked, undutiful girl that you are—and as ungrateful as you are high! Go and marry!" she continued, her passion increasing with expression. "Don't think that I want to keep you at home. You are nothing but a nuisance from first to last—a trouble and a plague, both you and your boy. Go and marry that old prig, or Mr. Branscombe, or Sandy Kemp the sign-painter"—how she sneered and showed her fang-like eye-teeth when she said this—"anybody you like! I wash my hands of you, and shall be glad to get rid of you. And so I say it!"

Augusta did not answer. Whatever was in her heart of anger and humiliation she stifled, as she had so often stifled it before. But this time she controlled only the expression; the feeling raged if her lips were still, and she felt as if she could not bear all this misery and contumely and live.

Without another word she turned and left the room; and in a few moments Mrs. Morshead heard her leave the house and saw her walk hurriedly down the drive—alone. For one of the few occasions since she had returned to the cold shelter of this ungenial home, she left her little son to the

care of the maids while she went off on her own business without him.

"I have a great mind to say that she shall never come back again, that she may pack up and go—she and her troublesome little brat. She is a wicked and undutiful young hussy, and as sly as she is disobedient. She has been nothing but a torment to me ever since she was born. She may go; and joy go with her!" said Mrs. Morshead aloud.

But her heart was heavy, and she tried in vain to stiffen her resolution by artificial aid—to keep her anger hot by crackling thorns. In vain too, she sought for comfort in her cat. The Shah purred lazily when she caressed him, but went to sleep on her lap, understanding nothing of all that terror of consequences, that unacknowledged regret for what she had said, and that one hot tear which fell from her eyes. It was all to give and nothing to receive in this worship of her four-footed favourite; and at this moment what she wanted was the support of sympathy in her wrong-doing, and the assurance that she had acted with dignity, spirit and maternal propriety all round.

Walking, she scarcely knew where nor for what purpose—not conscious of the cold north wind that blew with such bitter force, nor of the heavy clouds which were massing sullenly overhead—not conscious of anything but the pain by which she was stung as by a living serpent—Augusta went on with a rapid step; her head on fire and her heart one great throb of passionate despair. What should she do? She could not, would not, must not, bear it! Her son's future fortune was precious and her care; but were not some things even more precious than that fortune? To live as he and she were living now, under perpetual insult, scoff, rebuke, suspicion—in perpetual subjection—was not this paying too dearly for his patrimony? At this moment she thought so; and she thought too, with a woman's madness—that madness of despair and rash resolve which was so seldom hers—that she would give herself to the first man who might ask her; to Sandro Kemp, were he here, for love and without fortune; to Colonel Moneypenny, for fortune and without love;—to any one indeed, rather than remain the sport and victim of her mother's tongue and temper. Any one! any one! yes, even to the Colonel!

"Well met!" said a voice with an indescribable ring of satisfaction in its tones.

She started as if from a dream and found herself immediately in front of the Colonel's place, Bellevue;—with the owner himself on the point of entering in at the lodge gate.

"Well met!" he said again, taking her hand. "You are just in time to shelter. The snowstorm has begun."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ON THE BRINK.

Here!—of all places in the world, this! The widow started at the sound of Colonel Moneypenny's voice as if he had been a spirit called from out the infinite by the spell of her desire. She looked up with a frightened and bewildered face. The guard which she usually maintained with so much care was suddenly broken down, and she was as confused and overcome as any other woman might have been. Had she been a mere school-girl met out of bounds, or caught in the act of stealing sacred apples, she could not have been more abashed for the moment than now, when Colonel Moneypenny woke her from her dreaming wrath and took her hand to lead her to his house for shelter.

That shelter was typical. She felt the secret correspondence of her unspoken thoughts with this translated action, and shivered as if the snow-flakes, falling fast, had touched her heart as well as her pallid face.

"You are quite pale! The weather is too much for you. You ought not to be out in such a storm," said Colonel Moneypenny with all his best courtesy—his finest mingling of the gentleman's dignity with the lover's tenderness. "Let us make haste up the avenue," he continued. "We shall soon reach the house."

"Thank you," said Augusta mechanically.

As mechanically she let him take her hand on his arm, and hold it for a moment closely clasped, as they walked rapidly between the leafless chestnuts which swayed and creaked in the wind and caught the snow as it fell in their branches like a net. The wind beat in their faces, and the large densely-frozen flakes stung her soft flesh as they were driven with almost the force of hail. She knew how strange it must seem to the Colonel that she should be out on such a day;

stranger still that she should have been met just at *his* gate But it was pleasant to feel that she had this shelter before her—that she might, if she would, escape once and for ever from all the present storms of her life—both from this in the midst of which she walked and from that other yet more difficult to bear at home.

She walked up the avenue with a strange sense of possible drifting out of present pain into temporary safety and future danger. She felt like a person slipping down a smooth and pleasant decline instead of continuing on a rugged, toilsome ascent. The motion was soothing and she shut her eyes to the rest. The storm raged without and her mother's house was even more inhospitable than the elements; she was on the Colonel's arm, making for the shelter of his home; and she knew that it rested only with her to hold that shelter as her own for ever if she would.

Nothing was said between them as they went up the avenue. Like a wise man who knows how to take care of himself, the Colonel objected to opening his mouth in such weather as this. He suffered not infrequently from neuralgia; and he and the dentist at Lingston knew a few secrets which the world at large did not even suspect. But when they came to the house, he led her in with the same fine mingling of courtesy and tenderness as before; checked only by the presence of his man from showing perhaps too openly what pleasure her crossing his threshold thus gave him. He did really love her, as much as a man naturally selfish and arbitrary, a little mean and very irritable, can love any one outside himself; and his hesitation, both before her marriage and now when she was again free, was but the ordinary hesitation of a man who has stiffened in his widower's groove, and who has more things to think of than one before he finally resolves to break the spell and renew his past in a second marriage.

He looked on this odd meeting at his own gates as a kind of sign—a correspondence—what some would call "a leading;" and he was excited and elated. That fellow whose presumption had so disturbed him had suddenly slipped like a snake out of his path, and he was master of the situation. There was no one else in Highwood or any other place who, so far as he knew, disputed with him the ground which he had marked out for his own. Sandro Kemp off the field, he had the course to himself. As for Mrs. Morshead's ferocious con-

stancy to the dead, that was a simple absurdity—a brutum fulmen which hurt no one. If Augusta loved him he had almost resolved that he would marry her. And he had money enough to secure her future, though she would not perhaps be quite so well off as if she inherited from her mother. The old woman lived on about half her income, if so much, and invested the other. He lived up to the last farthing of his. There was too, this little son of his dead rival to be thought of; and perhaps others whose claims would be greater and their share larger. He would not make his heir of the Professor's son, if he had his own to endow; but he could give the lad a good education and see him through the first sterile years of his profession. Pecuniarily it would not be so good for Augusta to marry him and be disinherited by her mother, as to remain where she was, waiting for that weary wearing of the dead woman's shoes. Still it would not be poverty; and she would make him happy.

Even at this moment of a lover's exaltation and a lover's keen appraisement of the value of the thing he wants, Colonel Moneypenny did not say to himself that he would make Augusta happy. That came as of course—as the corollary, the reflection, the inevitable sequence to his own state of content. Or rather it did not enter into his calculations at all, one way or the other. When we hire a servant or buy a horse we do not think of the servant's happiness under our mastership, of the horse's pleasure under our guidance. If we give sufficient wages to the one, good food to the other, we are quit of all obligation; but our own advantage remains, as the rope on which the whole value of the transaction depends. The Colonel was not the only man in England who, courting a woman with delicate devotion while she holds herself mistress of the situation, free to grant and able to withhold, keeps her as a caged creature, fairly caught and trapped, when once she has come down from her height to his lure; and in keeping her thus forgets to ask if she likes her fate—and would not stop for the answer if she did.

The drawing-room at Bellevue was, as is so often the case in the houses of unmarried men, reserved for state social occasions when there were dinner-parties on hand, or one of those pleasant little dances with supper to follow, for which the Colonel was famous. He himself lived in the dining-room and library, both of which were comfortable enough;

and now, as he and Augusta came in from the wind and the snow outside, the bright blazing fire and not ungraceful litter of occupancy were as a welcome to Home. Without doubt the library was essentially masculine in its circumstances, and wanted the graceful touch of a woman's hand, the fringe of pretty nothings which she always adds. But it was full of the substantial luxury which a man finds pleasanter to his senses than those spots of colour and sparkle which are known by the general term of ornaments. And if the books were not what is called drawing-room books, they were handsome and solid and gave one the impression of stores of latent learning in the Colonel's mind, and a kind of colossal literary digestion. It was all very warm and strong and ample; and the Colonel himself seemed to gain in breadth from the comfortable stability of his surroundings.

By this time Augusta had recovered herself. The question had formed itself clearly in her mind:—Should she? or:—Should she not? He had enough to make her future safe if not brilliant—enough for her son, who must be the only heir. And she could if she would. The house was full of capabilities if once she put her hand to it; her social position as his wife would be unexceptionable; she might even in time win her mother over to forgiveness; and this fire was so comforting! It was with a sense of real bien-être that she sank down in the easy chair which he pulled up for her close to the fender. It was not his own special chair. That was sacred even against Augusta Latrobe; for Colonel Moneypenny was a man who understood the whole theory of self-respect and practised the whole art of self-indulgence. In her present state of moral destitution, the mere physical enjoyment of this rest and fire, the material sufficiency of the Colonel's home, had a curiously soothing effect on her. As she sank back in the long low curved chair, and put up her pretty feet on the fender—had she given herself time to think she would have been ashamed of the extent to which these purely physical pleasures touched her.

The Colonel rang the bell for cake and wine. Unmarried men always give their lady visitors wine. Where a woman would show her baby the man brings out his port and sherry. Augusta laughed a little and blushed a little more, as she said: "No; she did not want any wine. She never took it before dinner, and very little even then."

"But," insisted the Colonel; "you must, indeed, Mrs.

Latrobe! The first time you have been to my house—like this—you must have a glass of wine for good luck!"

He could not say that it was the first time she had been to his house at all; for he gave parties, as has been said, like any other decent citizen; but "like this" meant her coming here alone—coming out of the storm and inclemency of the day—out of the wretchedness and humiliation of her home—coming in now as the favoured guest to be made the future mistress should his humour finally decide that way.

"I shall be glad to do anything for good luck!" said Augusta rashly, with a little laugh to hide the bitter spring-head of her words.

The Colonel looked at her with an odd expression in his face. She was quick-witted, but she could not quite read that look.

"Do you want good luck in your life?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, no! not much! Not more than one always wants something which one has not got!" she answered lightly. "It is only a foolish way we all have of making ourselves out ill-treated by fortune!"

She thought that, if anything had to come to her from this side, it must not be coloured with compassion. If she herself knew that she was simply selling herself for peace, the Colonel must never believe but that she gave herself grandly, to bless and be blessed.

At this moment the servant brought in the wine, and with his own hand the Colonel poured out a glassful and gave it to Augusta. It was that soft, silky, insidious, old brown sherry, which, in defiance of gout, some people still drink. All the fire of the alcohol which had once inflamed it had burnt itself out by time, leaving only strength and disguising the presence of what it left. Soft as cream and strong as brandy, it completed the sense of bien-être which the pretty widow felt; and, after she had drunk half her glassful, she said with a smile:

"What excellent wine! I am no great judge of sherry, but this seems to me superb."

"I am glad you like it," said the Colonel with supreme satisfaction. "And—pardon me—you are a good judge! This wine is indeed excellent. It is no hyperbole to call it superb. Ah!" he added, as he held up his glass between him and the light, and lovingly noted its merits of body,

bouquet and colour; "this is not to be had in the market now for love or money!—Unique!—quite unique! And you like it! I am so glad!"

He almost laughed as he said this; for naturally a man does not like to throw his wine away on an unappreciative palate; and women are so stupid as to the value of brands and bins!

"Let me fill up your glass," he then said, advancing towards his guest, decanter in hand.

She drew her glass away, covering it with her pretty black-gloved fingers, and laughing in her nice bright way as she looked up into his eyes.

"No! no!" she said. "I am so little used to wine at this time of the day; and this is so strong. I should be afraid."

How friendly they were getting! To see them there in this familiar, laughing, half-playful kind of domesticity, no one would have thought that for years the Colonel had cherished against Augusta Latrobe a chronic resentment which only so lately had taken so acute a form—a form which had done her so much irreparable mischief at home and had dealt the man, whom in her heart she loved, a blow that she knew would be to him like death.

"Well, finish that. It will do you good after your cold walk," said the Colonel; and Augusta obeyed.

"Yes, it is very good," she said, drinking it frankly; not with the timid little sips of a woman half afraid of what she is about, or as if she expected to find a spider or a newt at the bottom of the glass. The fair widow had just her right share of healthy, natural sensualism—not a line in excess—just her right and fitting share.

How warm and pleasant it was! The two sat over the fire in an easy, sociable, confidential way that had its charms and warmed their souls as the soft brown sherry warmed their blood. The snow was falling fast, and The Laurels looked so far off! The interior was so pleasant, and it composed so naturally!

"How delightful it would be to have you always here!" said Colonel Moneypenny abruptly.

She laughed in her light easy way.

"I am not so sure of that," she said with a little mocking accent—patently artificial; but the colour deepened under her bonnet.

"I am," said the Colonel. "My life is so lonely!" he added pathetically.

She moved her chair a few inches from the fire, and took a newspaper from the table as a screen for her face.

"Better lonely than uncongenial," she said. "The fire catches one's face so dreadfully after a walk in the cold wind!" she added, as if apologizing for the ruddy glow that had come into hers, and for the improvised screen made out of the newspaper.

"It is a melancholy look-out to live and die alone," began the Colonel again.

This little break had somewhat baffled him; but he had tenacity and could always begin where he left off.

"One gets used to it," said Augusta, fluttering through the leaves of her paper. "After a time one gets used to everything," was her philosophic addendum.

"Not to happiness—at least not in the sense of satiety," blundered the Colonel.

"Is there any real happiness in the world?" asked Augusta lightly.

"*You* need not ask this," he replied. "Capable of giving so much as you are, you must be capable of receiving in the same proportion."

He brought his chair a couple of inches nearer to hers, and looked into her face with a certain agitation, a certain tenderness in his eyes which betokened danger.

The incline was very smooth and she was slipping down it pleasantly. After all, the Colonel was really not a bad man. He was irritable and arbitrary, jealous and selfish, but he was honourable and a gentleman; and every woman thinks that if an unmarried man, who is now cross-cornered and disagreeable, were but married to her, he would be all right, and everything would go on velvet. She could manage him if she were his wife. And the Colonel could not be harsher to her boy, Augusta went on thinking, than was her own mother. Probably he would be far less harsh and, by the sympathy of sex, would take an interest in him and help to make him the honourable gentleman of her ambition.

Yes; the incline was pleasant; and surely that was a firm green sward at the bottom? It was not a treacherous bit of swamp covered over with a lying growth of superficial herbage?

She raised her pretty eyes to his with a soft and yielding look.

"A woman's best happiness," she said gently, "is in that which she gives. What she gives she receives back twenty-fold."

"Ah, how true! How beautiful!" he said, with the deep-drawn breath of a man violently moved.

He rose from his seat and went over to her; but just as he took her hand in both of his and bent his head to speak, the man-servant came into the room to tell him that he was wanted, if he would please to come; the constable was in the Justice-room, and had come to speak to him now at once.

It was the most annoying, the most mistimed interruption that could be imagined; and the Colonel had only just time to let Augusta's hand fall on her lap, while he made believe to take a book from the table. How much the man saw, and how much he suspected, remained his own secret. His manner showed nothing, and the Colonel was in a sense his prisoner and the constable's—waiting for him in the Justice-room.

He made a stately kind of bow to Augusta and muttered a few formal words of apology for his absence; then left the room with his man whom, if it had been policy and good manners, he could have kicked with hearty goodwill.

Augusta on her side, drew a deep breath when he had gone. She raised herself from her lounging position in the easy-chair, and walked to the window, looking out on the fast-falling snow, which however fell more quietly than before. The wind had fallen and the more active energy of the storm had passed.

She still held the paper in her hand. Partly to relieve the awkward suspense of the moment with its sense of check and discovery in one, partly to divert her thoughts from the discomfort of the home that she had and the doubtful security of the home that she might have if she would, she looked through the items of news, scarcely knowing what she saw. Suddenly a name caught her eye. Her flushed face paled to the whiteness of that snowdrift against the leafless rose-trees, as she read a short abstract of the will of Henry Kemp, given as a quotation from the paper which does this special business. The personalty was sworn under sixty thousand pounds; and with the exception of a few insignificant legacies, the whole was left to his brother Sandro, the sole executor and residuary legatee. The time of poverty

then had passed for him, and he was now rich like his brothers, as he should always have been!

And as nothing comes alone in this odd life of ours—as, when fate gives one blow, fortune adds a second and chance follows up with a third—so, when fortune grants one boon, others fall from the skies at every point and the golden shower multiplies as it rains down;—thus, now when Sandro Kemp had come into this sufficient inheritance, free of work, his work was now made of supreme value. A few paragraphs from this extract stood one which Augusta also read, stating how Mr. Sandro Kemp's designs for that important cathedral had been accepted by the committee appointed to judge the work of the competitors; and how grand the writer, who was reviewing their several merits while stating this fact, held these special designs to be. He was then rich and famous at a blow; and she would not marry the Colonel.

And yet, had she not chilled and shocked, perhaps for ever, the man whom she knew in her own heart she loved, and who loved her? How could she undo that fatal past?—how make him understand that she had acted under coercion, and that what she had done had been for her child's sake and not by her own desire? She could not write to him even to congratulate him. She could not fling herself in his way now that fortune had so richly endowed him, seeing that she had thrust him aside when he was still under the lash of fate. She had done what she believed right at the time. And yet, haunting thoughts of the sacredness of Love—of Love the best thing in life—of Love at any price and all the rest let go for him—of Love before riches—of Love even before duty; had she not counselled this to Stella?—of Love as the Great God, with every other virtue, every other affection, standing simply as his henchman—haunting thoughts of all this divine sacredness and of her adverse decision, came across her brain like the echoes of a triumphal march drowned by the mournful strain of a funeral dirge. If only she had clung to Love and had abjured fear and the future! If only she had! And yet; she had done for the best. She had plucked her own breast bare and bleeding that her child might be kept safe and warm. It had turned out ill; but ever and ever she came round to that one constant point—she had done for the best. And she would not marry the Colonel.

When Colonel Moneypenny came back from that troublesome bit of magisterial business which had taken him to the

room he called his Justice's-room, and the constable waiting for that magical bit of paper duly signed and delivered, he was made to feel, he did not know how, that the favourable moment had passed, that the fire had burned down into ashes, that the vane of the pretty widow's humour was set to another wind, and that everything was changed.

She was her old self again—clear, candid and inscrutable; soft to the touch and unyielding at the core; sweet, sympathetic, womanly, pure womanly in manner, but, when probed, apparently destitute of all feeling, all romance, all passion, all pleasant feminine weakness; eminently her old reasonable, well-controlled self, whom no one could soften or warm or deflect beyond the limits which she had marked out for herself. The tender darkness had gone out of her eyes; the drooping curve had left her lips; her face showed no gentle indecision, her figure no yielding lines of graceful self-abandonment. She had gone back to her old shape of waxen smoothness and adamantine hardness—of crystalline clearness and crystalline inflexibility.

She was still standing by the window as he came in, but she had laid the paper on the table—the page doubled inward where she had read about Sandro Kemp.

"I think the storm is passing now," she said cheerily, her voice as clear as a silver bell and about as soulless.

"I hope not," said Colonel Moneypenny, making an attempt to return to his interrupted gallantries.

He spoke with a grave kind of tenderness sufficiently obvious. She laughed in her pleasant, light, superficial way.

"We shall all be snowed up if it lasts much longer!" she said.

"There might be a worse fate in store for me than to be snowed up with you as my guest," said the Colonel.

She gave an affected little shiver and looked at him with eyes exasperatingly clear.

"What an awful idea!" she said with well-acted gaiety. "As that would never do, and may be possible, I think I had better set out at once. The wind has quite fallen, and a quiet snow-shower bursts soon."

She gave a pull at her bonnet-strings which were not untied, and smoothed down her gloves which she had not withdrawn. These actions were "survivals," and expressed her feeling of "dressing to go out."

"You cannot go out while this lasts," said Colonel Money-

penny as gravely as before, but with a certain latent heat and eagerness which he had not the power to control, though he felt that it was bad policy to show too much feeling at the moment. "Why this sudden haste?" he asked, forcing a smile. "Come back to the fire and make yourself comfortable again."

"It is getting late," she said, glancing at the clock. "It will soon be quite dusk."

"You have a full half-hour of daylight yet, and I will see that you are taken care of," said the Colonel. "Come! It really is too bad for you to think of going yet!"

As he spoke the door-bell rang sharply. A trampling of feet in the hall; a sound as of many huge dogs shaking themselves and of at least half a dozen men stamping themselves clear of something that would cling; bursts of loud laughter; shrill cries of high-pitched voices; all these were heard. And then the library-door was flung open and Georgie and Pattie Pennefather, in light drab coachman's coats, with soft felt unornamented hats and blue bird's-eye neckties came streaming into the room; the two multiplied into a small crowd by the noise and tumult and "go" of their entrance.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TESTED FOR TRUTH.

"Upon my word!" shouted Pip as they came into the room and took in the situation at a glance—the two easy-chairs drawn close up to the fire; the wine and cake on the table; the look of home and domesticity in the whole arrangements. "Well I never!—upon my word!" she repeated.

"Oh, you sly-boots, Augusta!" vociferated Gip.

"And who would have thought it?" cried both these chartered tormentors in a breath.

"Who would have thought what, girls?" asked the widow, with smiling unconsciousness of possible evil.

"Oh, I say, that is coming it too strong! 'Who would have thought what?' when we find you sitting here like Darby and Joan, you and the Colonel, as cozy and comfortable as you please."

"Oh! that is what you mean. Yes; is it not shocking?" returned the widow, still smiling, in her pleasant, frank, un-

conscious way, as if there were no evil possible in the world of man and no suspicion in the mind of woman. "But when one is caught in a storm, what is one to do?" she added with an amiable little laugh. "Bellevue or Sherrardine, or any other place of shelter, I can assure you, my dears! A cowshed in such a frightful storm as it was!"

"Oh, that is all very well," said Pip. "But what brought you out such a day as this, I should like to know? Such a chimney-corner creature as you are, what business had you to be on the tramp in weather which every one could see was going to be a buster?"

"Yes," echoed Gip; "what business had you out at all, Mrs. Augusta? Come, you have to confess, you know, so you might as well begin!"

"And what brings you two out?" said the widow, with the air of turning the tables. "I think you had better begin with your confession, and I will come after."

"Oh! we have a good reason, haven't we, George?" said Pip, diving into one of the pockets of her coachman's box-coat, which she had opened like a man, "to get the good of when she went out again." "We have come on an errand of charity, so we are all safe. There is that poor old Reuben Norris, of Barnes," she continued, pulling out a damp bit of crumpled paper; "don't you know him?—the old creature with a wooden leg, and that hard-working Jessie of a daughter who goes out charing and more than half keeps the house? Well! poor Jessie is down with fever; and there is old Reuben crying about the lane in the snow with his wooden leg and no fire, and not a bit in the house to eat and no one to go near poor Jessie or to boil him so much as a potato-paring. They are all afraid, the cowards! So we are getting up a subscription for them; and we have got quite a nice little hatful for the poor things already. And that's why we have come here. So now that's the whole of that. And I am sure you won't refuse, Colonel?" she added with what she meant to be a coaxing accent and an irresistible look of appeal. "You'll come down handsomely like the rest, won't you?"

Now, the two things most abhorrent to Colonel Moneypenny were to be chaffed for the one part and asked to subscribe for the other. He was proud, sensitive, irritable, mean; and that these madcap hoydens should have it in their power to talk of him, laugh at him, make fun of the visit which had gone so near to be one of the most serious matters of his life, and

then that they should have asked him for a subscription in the presence of Augusta Latrobe whose good graces, though he wished to win, he thought dearly purchased by the gift of a sovereign—that they should have all this in their power annoyed and disturbed him almost beyond his power of conventional concealment.

"Well, I don't know about that," he said, vigorously stirring the fire which wanted no stirring at all. "I must first be convinced of the justice of the case. You ladies, with your charities and all the rest of it, often go beyond the borders and do more harm than the deuce," he added irritably.

It did him good to have this little fling.

"Oh, but Colonel Moneypenny!—poor old Reuben!" said Gip, opening her eyes. Doubt, caution, inquiry holding back till fully satisfied as to the merits of a case—nothing of all this came into the Pennefather category of wise action! "Every one knows what a hard-working old chap he is, wooden leg and all. And there is no mistake about Jessie. She is down with fever as sure as ever any one was; and she will not do a stroke of work for a month of Sundays. We can't be doing harm in making up a little sum for him just to help him over the style, poor old beggar!"

"Jessie won't be out for another ten weeks at the earliest—Dr. Quigley says so," chimed in Pip; "and we thought that if we could get ten or twelve pounds or so it would just keep them for the time she has got to be laid by. You can't call that paupering the people, as you are so fond of doing."

"Pauperizing!" said Colonel Moneypenny in a voice with a decided tendency to become a growl.

"Well, pauperizing," said Pip, with a grimace.

"You made a bad shot there, Patrick, with your big words," shouted Gip with a laugh.

"No; that does seem a good case as you say, girls; does it not, Colonel Moneypenny?" put in Augusta with her sweet womanly reasonable air, like a very nice-looking Themis holding the scales evenly between the two sides.

"Ah, you dear old thing! What a wise thing you are, Augusta!" said Gip, giving the widow an affectionate hug. The Doves were odd girls in the wholesale way in which they identified themselves with any "case" like this of poor old Reuben Norris. They made it their own; and "worked it" with a superabundance of zeal and eagerness—including animosity for those who did not join with them, and overflowing

affection and gratitude for those who act. "I always say to every one that Augusta Latrobe is out and out the best sort here." she added, addressing space and universe. "*You* are not a sneak," she went on, turning back to the concrete and the widow. "*You* are always fair and above board, and we all know what *you* are after!"

Her tone, as she said this, was harsh and bitter. It did no good to shoot out her arrows against Stella when neither the girl herself nor her special friend and admirer, Val, was there. But it soothed her angry passion for just the moment; and no one cared nor noticed.

"You are very kind to say so," said Augusta, that pretty pale pink flush in her cheeks, for which she was famous, deepening a little uncomfortably. "At all events, I am a true friend," she added prettily, looking at the sisters; but she meant Colonel Moneypenny to profit by the application. He had to be flung overboard, and she would not stint soft words before the hard deed of his immolation. "Now to business. What subscriptions are you making? How much do you want? What am I to put down?"

This ready offer of service and conformity with the general rule was magnanimous on Augusta's part. Her mother allowed her only thirty pounds a year for her own dress and menus plaisirs; just the same sum as she had when she was eighteen. And though the old woman took on herself the charge of the child's wardrobe, still, there were many little expenses for him which naturally fell on Augusta and which she could not carry over to the great account. Hence, she was emphatically "badly off;" and any kind of subscription told on her slender finances heavily. All the same she said: "What am I to put down?" with the air of one who had thousands at the back of her poor little shabby tens.

"Well, every one has given a sovereign as yet," said Pip in a doubtful tone.

She knew that Augusta was always hard up, as they called it; and though she wanted to land the Colonel's gold she was sorry to have to bait with Augusta's.

"Then I will give a sovereign also," said the widow with the tranquil stoicism of the Red Indian who parts with his pound of flesh.

"You are a darling!" said Gip.

"It is a large subscription," said the Colonel discontentedly. 'Half-a-crown would have been ample!"

"Oh! we were not enough for that," said Pip. "We will bring in the little fishes after we have gaffed the big ones. The half-crowns and sixpences will come in when we have tackled all the gold we can collar. So now, Colonel, if you please. Shall I say two, as you are the only gentleman among us?"

"No," said the Colonel shortly. "One is seventeen and sixpence too much!"

"Oh!" cried Pip. "What an awful old screw you make yourself out to be, Colonel, when every one knows you are as generous as you please. Don't give yourself a bad character; and come, down with your sub handsomely."

Colonel Moneypenny's face was, what stupid people call, "a study." He hated the Pennefather slang and rollick as bitterly as did old Mrs. Morshead herself; he was angry at the interruption and revolted at having to give his money; but he was in a trap and there was no way of escape. Sullenly he brought out his purse and had a difficulty with the clasp. When he had got it fairly open he fingered all his gold pieces one after the other, rejecting this and that till he finally chose the one which was most worn and defaced. This he handed to Gip, with a cross: "There!" expressive of anything rather than the generosity for which Pattie had so mischievously given him credit.

"No, not to Codlin—to Short," shouted Pattie. "I'm treasurer, and George only does the touting. Very much ta'!" she added, as she took the money from her sister and put it loose into her box-coat pocket. "Now, your name, Colonel; and yours too, Augusta, please; just there—under the Branscombe fist. Shall I bracket them?" she asked audaciously after they were written; "and put Bellevue after both?"

"What a child you are, Pattie!" said Augusta, with the most careless good humour—but how her cheeks burned!

"Patrick, mind your manners," shouted her sister.

"What's the harm?" said Pattie innocently. "There's no harm, is there, Colonel? Augusta is here, isn't she?"

"So are you, Miss Pennefather," answered Colonel Moneypenny with what he meant to be a significant manner.

"Yes, we are; but George and I don't count with you," returned Pip.

And at this both the Doves laughed as at an exquisite joke till the Colonel speculated privately on the possibility of

turning them bodily out of his house, and retaining his gentlehood at the same time.

Gip, not actively engaged in the little skirmish of wits and having to fulfil only the light duties of laughing chorus, had been looking round the room, her bold black roving eyes searching everywhere, hungry for something to fasten on for "chaff." She saw the newspaper lying on the table; and took it up. It was the same as that which they affected at Sherrardine and of which she religiously skimmed the smaller items of news every morning.

"Oh, Augusta," she shouted; "did you see that your old flame, Sandro Kemp, has had a fortune left him? His brother has died and Sandro has come in for all the tin. And he has come in too, for no end of kudos for something he has done—I don't know what exactly; a church or a workhouse, or something; but it seems a very fine set-out according to the paper. Ain't you glad? I am. He was always a good fellow, though he was as dull as old boots. He *was* heavy, and no mistake! I shall never forget him at our picnic in the summer. He was that dismal—I never saw! Still, I am glad that he has tumbled into all these good things, ain't you?"

Colonel Moneypenny's thin and puckered face became livid; Augusta's, fair, smooth, soft, was crimson.

"Indeed?" she said with as much ease as she could assume; but her breath was the least in the world interrupted.

"I should have thought you would have known first of all people. You and he were always such chums together," said Gip, with all her old spirited audacity, laughing and twinkling her bold bright eyes as she spoke.

Augusta laughed too.

"I was always supposed to be Mr. Kemp's mysterious confidante," she said quite pleasantly; "but I knew no more of him than the rest. However, I am glad of his good fortune."

"You hadn't seen it?" said Gip with no ulterior motive. "It is in this very paper," fluttering the leaves.

"Is it? I had the paper in my hand," said Augusta with deliberate prevarication and intention to mislead

"It was odd you did not see it," said Colonel Moneypenny speaking slowly, his eyes levelled at that fair and practically mendacious face, and his bitter voice full of doubt.

"I should, if I had read it," she answered smiling.

But for all her self-control, and though she tried, she could not look into the Colonel's face when she spoke.

"He will be quite a swell now!" said the innocent mischief-maker with a loud laugh. "My goodness! fancy old Sandro Kemp a swell! He will not be his old stupid self if he's a swell!" she said with another peal, in which her sister joined.

"He had better return here, if he has money. He went, I remember, suddenly—they said he ran away from his creditors," said the Colonel, biting off each word and speaking with uncontrollable malice and spite.

"Did he, now?" answered Gip meditatively. "I didn't think that, Colonel. I think old Kemp was an honest old chap. Mrs. Prinsep says so—though he was as dull as old boots and as heavy as lead."

"And I don't; and I have good reason to know," said Colonel Moneypenny viciously.

And his falsehood, though indirect, was a worse crime than Augusta's, which was apparently the more brazen and sinful.

"Well, we never know who's who!" half sighed Gip, from the sorrowful experience of Val's defection and Stella's sneakiness. "At all events," she added, turning again to Augusta with that odd kind of sudden affection which meant less love for her than a blow at these two absent sinners: "*You* are true, Augusta; *you* are not a sneak; *you* don't tell lies; *you* wouldn't say one thing and mean another and change your mind half a dozen times a day! And *you* wouldn't pretend to care for one man when all the time you were bringing on another!"

"No," said Augusta, just as she had said "No" to her knowledge of Sandro Kemp's good fortune.

"Well, girls," said Pip suddenly: "if you are going to stay here all day I'm not. I have to go. You may do as you like."

"All right, Patrick," said Gip; "I'm ready. We can leave Augusta," she added slily.

"No; I am coming too," said the widow; and the Colonel this time made no objection.

The fire had burned out in very truth and only dull dead ashes were left. And yet how near a thing it had been!—how near!

The irruption of these curly-headed savages was so far to Augusta's good, in that she was able to answer her mother

and baffle her, while giving an account of herself that should conceal what she did not wish to have known without the need of another direct falsehood. This dangerous weapon of defence the poor widow reserved as a last resource on grand and perilous occasions. Had she been rebuked, she would have justified herself by saying that she never told untruths when she could possibly avoid it. True, she did not always tell all that was; but reticence was not necessarily falsehood; and Mrs. Morshead was undoubtedly a dangerous woman in whom to confide. And then Augusta made the distinction which many others make between active and negative falsehoods; also between those which do harm to others and those which only protect ourselves.

When she had taken off her walking-things, and been for a little time with her boy—whom she found crying for her return, restless, feverish, peevish and unlike himself—she went into the drawing-room to her mother. The red fire was low in the grate, a mass of flameless cinders giving heat but no light; the lamp had not yet been brought in; the shutters were not closed; the curtains were not drawn; out of doors could be seen only by the black branches of the leafless trees, the solemn whiteness of the snow, the grey look of the sky; within, was the lonely old woman, there in the dim light of the melancholy evening, sitting silent and stiff in her high-backed chair like a grim sentinel of sorrow, without work in her hands as without joy or love or gladness in her life. She was quite alone. Even her cat had left her, and she had dismissed her maid sharply. She was glooming over her daughter's prolonged absence, and fearing she scarcely knew what; reproaching her bitterly by her voluntary thoughts, but reproaching herself more bitterly in her involuntary conscience.

The dull lifelessness of it all—the want of brightness, of welcome, of the sense of home and peace, struck on the widow with painful force. It seemed to her that she was returning to her prison, if not her grave. And after that glance of possible companionship with Colonel Moneypenny—that drama, spoilt as it was, of possible happiness with Sandro—this miserable, uncongenial, loveless home was a veritable torture. Anything rather than this!—yes, for herself, anything! But her boy, her little son—for him she must still suffer and be strong.

"Oh, that is you, is it?" said Mrs. Morshead, as she came

n, with the child in her hand. "And where have you been all this time, I should like to know? I was just beginning to wonder if you ever meant to condescend so far as to come home at all or no. Going out on such a day as this! One would think you had St. Vitus's dance and could not sit still! Where have you been, I say?" sharply.

"I came home with the Pennefather girls," said Augusta prevaricating.

"Well, you are the most extraordinary young woman I ever saw, and the most inconsiderate!" said Mrs. Morshead. "You go out and come in just as you like, and treat me with no more consideration than if I were a shoeblack. You never ask my leave, but just go tramping about, here and there, as if you were mistress of everything and I had nothing to do but to find money and food and clothing for you and that boy of yours. Troublesome little toad! I have heard him crying at least a dozen times since you went out. What you are made of I can't think, to go and leave the poor fellow as you do. You are an odd kind of mother, I must say! Like daughter like mother—and so it is, sure enough."

"Hush, mother," said Augusta with strange and sudden sternness. "I cannot bear it! You must not, you must not!" she added, her voice full of something so unusual to her, so unnatural, that her little boy squared his lips almost in fear, and her mother very nearly started. It was like a transformation—the sudden putting on of a wolf's fangs in the lamb. of an eagle's beak and claws in the dove.

"Well, I'm sure! What next, I should like to know? I am not mistress in my own house, I suppose? I am not the owner? You are a bad-tempered and impertinent girl, that is what you are; but you always were, so I suppose I must put up with it. But don't let me have any more of your insolence, for *I* cannot bear it; and so I tell you! And perhaps you will be so very condescending as to ring the bell for the lamp, if it is not asking too much of you!

The words were aggravating and harsh enough; and the voice was no softer than the words; but by that certain subtle something in her manner which tells of defeat, even when a brave front is kept, Augusta knew that her mother had been dominated and that for the next few hours there would be no more active insult.

The day had been so full of emotion, of distress, of false security and real danger, of regret and excitement generally,

that the naturally calm nerves and quiet self-command of the widow had broken under the strain and she found herself unable to bear the old woman's acrid humour with her usual serenity. Her mother recognized the strain also, and was wise enough not to hang on it more than she could help, so that the next few hours did, as Augusta expected, pass in comparative quietness. The little fellow sat in his mother's lap amused by a book of pictures, either not speaking at all or speaking below his breath; but he was languid and very feverish, and Augusta had some difficulty in keeping him from being fretful—which would have drawn down on him the wrath of his grandmother, always so ready to be drawn down on his poor little sunny head!

Later in the evening however, he seemed to grow so much worse that when Augusta came from putting him to bed she said with a white face:

"Tony seems very ill to-night, mamma; will you let me send for Dr. Quigley?"

"What has the child got?" snapped the old woman. "He is always ill, or something!"

"I do not know, but he is feverish and certainly very much out of sorts. His little hands are burning and his face is as hot as fire," answered Tony's mother, trembling.

"Oh, it is nothing! You make such a fuss about him! It is only a feverish cold that he has. Give him a little sweet spirits-of-nitre and wrap him up well. You would take him out the other day when I told you not, and warned you; so now you are punished for your obstinacy, as I said you would be."

Mrs. Morshead gave her shawl the well-known twitch when she said this, and seemed prepared for a quarrel.

"That was ten days ago. He took no cold then, and this is not a feverish cold," said Augusta firmly. "I think Dr. Quigley ought to be sent for," she repeated.

"You are not over thoughtful for that poor man, nor for any one else—sending out on such a night as this," said Mrs. Morshead.

"May I ask John to go?" repeated Augusta.

"I don't believe there's the smallest occasion," answered the old woman. "You frighten yourself for nothing at all about that child. If his finger aches you think he is going to die, and it is the doctor here and the doctor there; such nonsense!"

"If I may not send John I must go myself," said Augusta with her well-known quiet tenacity; "but I want to stay with my boy."

"Oh! have your own way, for goodness' sake, and don't worry me any more!" said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "Send for Dr. Quigley, or a dozen doctors if you like—send for Dr. Mann, from Lingston, now at once if you choose—but for mercy's sake do let me have a little peace! I am sick to death of all this noise and confusion. Of all the worrying, troublesome girls I ever met in my life, Augusta, you are the worst; and do leave me in peace!"

So the doctor was sent for, and when he came he would not give a decided opinion.

"It is fever," he said.

But whether it would turn out to be measles, scarlet-fever, or something else, neither he nor any one else could tell at this early stage. All that the mother knew was, that her little boy was ill and that she must stand between him and death—if she could.

CHAPTER XXXV.

TURNING THE KNIFE.

It would not have been the Pennefathers if they had not sent over to Jack in exile all the news which they could scrape together. Still less would it have been they if they had not widened all the borders and deepened all the lines, so that everything should be presented in such vivid colours as would "amuse the poor old chap" and give him a good grip on things as they were at the old place. And among the rest they told him all about Valentine Cowley's shameful and outrageous conduct in "following up" Stella Branscombe; though why shameful and outrageous they forgot to explain. And then they launched out into denunciations of Stella's horrible "sneakiness" in allowing herself to be followed up at all, and her sinful humbug in bringing Val on as she did while pretending all the time that she did not. That Stella was this sneak which they determined to prove her, they still further evidenced by saying, in true Pennefather style, how she was never out of Ran Mac's pocket, and how Ran followed her about like a shadow, and looked at Val just as one dog looks at another with a bone between. "And for the matter of

that," said Gip, who was the scribe on this occasion: "Stella Branscombe is little better than a bone—such a lean, scraggy, washed-out thread-paper as she has grown! What Val or any one else can see in her I can't tell; and no one else can so far as I can make out! Little wretch she is!"—Gip went on to say, indignation running off with her pen like an unbitted horse; "there is Val making up to her no end, and looking such a loon when he does!—and Ran is never out of her pocket; and she is all the while putting on lackadaisical fine-lady airs as if she were breaking her heart for that good-for-nothing Cyril over in India. Isn't it a screaming farce?—a screaming shame, too!"

Such a multiplicity of adorers was indeed an offence against good morals in the Pennefather code, because it was an offence against justice and good fellowship, fair dealing and doing by others as you would be done by. And these are virtues of the first magnitude in a society mainly composed of marriageable maidens where, if things are to hold together at all, the whole duty of a girl is to be content with her own lover and not to poach on her neighbours' preserves.

And as Stella Branscombe, whether wilfully or innocently—they said wilfully—had offended against this code, and had poached on Georgie Pennefather's preserves, it was only right and fitting that she should be "trounced;" and trounced she was accordingly.

If such a letter as this from the old home was as of course, it was also as of course that Jack should ride over to Cyril the day after its reception, to pour out all the gossip contained therein as a sieve would let down a bucket of water. There was not the slightest intention of paining Cyril or of doing Stella any harm by this generous transfer of Highwood news. Jack was too kind-hearted to intentionally hurt any one; but he had the Pennefather insensitiveness and want of imagination; and facts were to him the only things in the world. It would have been to him like taking aim at a cloud had he been asked to allow for feelings in his dealings with facts. If Stella and Val were putting their horses' heads together, they were, and there was no use in denying it; and if Ran lived in her pocket, and went after her like a shadow, and looked at Val across her shoulders as a dog looks at another over a bone, he did; and there was no use in denying that either. So he presented both items of news to Cyril; as he would have told him that a certain cricket-match had

been lost, or a certain boat-race had been won; and left him to make the best of them at his leisure.

That result was a letter to Randolph which pained that faithful chum even more than had the former whereof the eloquent omissions had made poor Stella cry. It was a mad, wild, wicked letter, suggestive of everything rather than an honest man's rightness of life or a gentleman's nobility of feeling. It was a letter which seemed as if Cyril must have been out of his sober self when he wrote it; or as if, which was worse, his physical sense being straight, his mind had gone aslant and his soul had become poisoned by recklessness and vice. In it he spoke of Randolph's secretaryship and devotion to the Branscombe family with a ferocious disdain which made Pylades wince. It did not comfort him to say to himself that the keynote of this ferocity was jealousy; and that Orestes, banished and dispossessed, would have been neither ferocious nor jealous had he not still been in love. We do not reason on the exact shape of a wound while we are smarting from the pain; and the rough, rude and sneering tone of this letter was a wound to the good friend who had made himself the watch-dog guarding the absent chum's ewe lamb from the wolves. Perhaps Asmodeus might have whispered with a laugh: Quis custodiet? Failing Asmodeus the honest fellow's loyalty was without a flaw, and the return was—this black ingratitude!

But so much may be said for Cyril—to people at a distance the most exaggerated reports come like gospel truths, and few stop to sift or analyze. And he was not one of those few. He had always had unbounded trust both in Randolph and Stella; but he knew human nature, he said to himself after the manner of those who blaspheme it, and he was prepared for treachery even from him, and for infidelity even from her. Wherefore he first chaffed Pylades about the secretaryship, and then he added:—"From what I hear, however, you cannot be going for the gloves, as the fair lady in question has apparently made her choice; and the two strings to her bow, of which you are only one, poor old man! have coalesced into a single line of catgut—Mr. Valentine Cowley! They say that orange-blossoms may be looked for in that quarter before long. I should like to have a square inch of the bride-cake, just to see how it looks." Then, warming to his mad work, one thought engendering another and fe r exaggerating doubt, he added an unworthy bit of

moral bravado, which was essentially despair, and said:—"Well! I am no dog in the manger. As I cannot marry Miss Stella Branscombe myself, I hope she will find her happiness with Mr. Valentine Cowley, though I would rather she had chosen you. So you see, old fellow, the sublime state of philosophy to which I have brought myself. Give me credit for the endeavour. And read this to Stella. I wish it. It will set to rest any little lingering feeling that she may still have for me, and I owe it to myself that she should not think I am breaking my heart for her or because of this marriage. Having once thrown me over all the rest comes easy." And then he added: "Perhaps I shall follow her example myself one of these days. We have no end of nice girls floating about here; and a man might do worse than take one of them to himself. We shall see. At all events, it is on the cards."

This letter placed Randolph in a difficult position. He was one of those blindly-faithful men who obey against their own better reason. If Cyril commanded him to tell Stella what he had said, Randolph saw no way out of the obligation. The whole thing was a frightfully painful tangle from first to last; but, coupled with Jack's reports of Cyril's "goings on" with Mrs. White, it did really seem a renunciation of the past and the playing away of trust after hope! And perhaps, if Cyril had really not only given up all claim on Stella, but all desire of future holding, it would be better to tell her, so that she should not break her heart for a man who had so satisfactorily patched up his own.

All the same, Randolph knew that nothing was really "on" between Stella and Valentine Cowley; and he could not very well show her what Cyril had said about himself. But he had to tell her something. And even if he had decided on keeping silence his manner would have betrayed him, as it always did when any trouble brooded over his face and his heart, like a fog between earth and sky.

Since that evening at the Lyons', Cyril's name had not been mentioned at Rose Hill. Mr. Branscombe had contented himself with a few slighting allusions to false gods and women who declined on lower levels; and Hortensia had taken occasion once or twice to declaim against the wickedness of modern youth in general, and to say how far the men of the elder generation surpassed them in nobility and refinement. To all of which Stella had given a calm and im-

personal kind of assent, as to vague propositions which had no special application to her; while stiffening her slender neck so that no one should see what she felt or if indeed she felt anything at all. Those cruel words were the cross on which she hung the garlands of her faith, of her denial, her constancy, her love. She would as soon have denied her religion as have doubted Cyril Ponsonby—an unspoiled woman having at least this advantage over the nobler sex, in that "knowledge of human nature" does not include with her pessimistic unbelief or blasphemous denial. She may be ignorant, enthusiastic, credulous, blind. Be it so. She has for compensation the happiness of ever living with her ideal enthroned in the innermost recesses of her heart—of holding the man whom she has once loved to be ever worthy of her love—and she escapes the pain of doubting the divine, and the sacrilege of making war on her gods.

Her eyes made quick by suffering and keen by love, Stella saw that something ailed her good friend and self-appointed watch-dog—her father's secretary and Cyril's representative. She guessed at once that it had reference to Cyril. Cyril—and all that grew about him as the suckers from a rosebush, the shoots of a vine—were the Alpha and Omega of her relations with Randolph. She was his Star to him; he was only the reflection of her Love to her. Were Cyril to pass out of her memory Randolph would pass out of her life, as the shadow fades away when the sun goes down. While the one lived and was loved—and while he lived he would be loved!—his friend would be hers, because part of himself by association. To love Randolph was one way of expressing love for Cyril; just as if this good and faithful Pylades had been a horse or a dog which Cyril had confided to her hands, and which was therefore sacred to her because it had been dear to him.

Hence, when she saw that something was amiss with Randolph she thought of Cyril; and when she said: "Randolph, what is the matter?" she did not mean "with you?" but "with Cyril?"

"Why do you ask, Miss Stella?" he said in confusion.

"Because I can see that something is wrong," was her reply.

"I wish you had not asked!" he said again, looking at her sorrowfully.

"But you must tell me," she returned with a certain

serious authority, a certain gentle queenliness which it was impossible for him to disobey.

Nevertheless, though he knew he must yield in the end, he hung back now and hesitated, unwilling to strike the blow which would pain her so acutely.

"I would rather not," he said reluctantly.

"Tell me," she said again with her gentle peremptoriness.

"I have heard from Cyril," he began; and then he stopped. At that moment he realized the whole anguish of Jephthah, the tragic obedience to his vow to Agamemnon.

"Well? from Cyril," she repeated; the colour deepening on her face, but no glad smile on her lips, no sunshine or delight in her eyes. "What does he say? What does he write about?" she asked.

"He has heard something about Valentine Cowley," said Randolph with the blundering honesty of a faithful servant doing his duty and devoid of tact.

The blood left her face and then came back till her cheeks burned as if with fever.

"Yes?" she said, as quietly as she could speak. "What has he heard?"

"That you are engaged and going to be married," said Randolph.

Now the worst was over. The murder was out and no more remained behind!

"Does he believe it?" asked Stella, speaking slowly.

He hung his head. This feeling of relief and the worse known was premature. The poison-bag had yet another drop; and he must empty it on her heart.

"Yes," he answered in a low voice.

"He does?—He believes it, Randolph?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a few moments, silent because a little stunned. It was a cruel return for her own faith in him. She had refused to believe a word to his discredit, and she had defended him publicly in the face of the world. At the first lying report, his faith in her had gone into dust and he believed her capable of an act of infidelity which with her took rank as a crime.

"And what does he say?" she asked after a pause.

She too must turn the knife in her wound after the manner of the tortured.

"He sends his congratulations," said Randolph; "and hopes you will be happy."

"He wants me to marry?"

"He did not say that he wanted you to marry," he answered.

"But he does not disapprove?"

"No; he does not disapprove."

"And he congratulates me?"

"Yes; he congratulates you," repeated the poor watch-dog sadly.

She held her head high. An odd look of pride struggled with her pain, and on the whole, perhaps, overcame it.

"I shall never marry Valentine Cowley, who, in the first place, has not asked me," she said; "but do not say so to Cyril," she added imperiously. "If he doubts me he must; but I will not do anything to undeceive him. You will do as I say, Randolph? You will not tell him that it is all a mistake, and that I am not going to be married to any one? If you say anything about me, merely say that you told me; and nothing more. You will do this?" she asked again.

"Yes," he answered humbly.

"Nothing about me; nothing; not a word!" she repeated passionately. "Only that you gave me his message. It was a message, Randolph, was it not?"

"Yes," he said, still so humble in his consciousness of crime and cruelty. "He said I was to tell you."

"Well, say that you told me—that you gave me his message and that I said nothing," reiterated Stella, her passion deepening. "I rely on you to do this."

"You may; I will do just as you say," he answered. "Oh, how sorry I am about it all! What miserable work all this gossip is!"

"He will know better some day," she said with vehemence and pride together. Then, suddenly relaxing into the self-pity of surprise at his distrust, she added tremulously; "I should have thought he would have known better now."

And with this her passion broke; the unnatural strain relaxed; and she hurried from the room because she could not control her weakness and did not wish even her good friend and watch-dog to discover it.

It was a fair and sunny afternoon, and Hortensia Lyon was with them as one of the family. Indeed she was now almost as much one of the Branscombe family as of her own. Ran-

dolph had done his work for the day and had been dismissed; and the three sat in the study in spite of Dr. Quigley and his advice—an artistic fever-fit being at this moment strong on Mr. Branscombe. Stella was paler even than usual, pallid as she always was; and a certain feverish irritability of manner, a certain strained hardness of expression made her as unlike her ordinary self as this cruel distrust was unlike the Cyril of her love. Her voice had a thin metallic ring in it, which of itself betrayed suffering; for when the naturally hard become unnaturally soft, and the soft make themselves hard, then we may know that the shadowy arrow has struck and that the wound is bleeding inwardly. And at this moment poor Stella's heart was bleeding in such sort that all her joy, all her hope and peace and happiness and love, now and to come, seemed ebbing away for ever. But she was brave through it all, and gave no other sign than was to be found in this curiously hard and feverish manner, this thin metallic ring in her voice.

"Have you heard that Mrs. Latrobe's little boy is very ill?" asked Hortensia, breaking the silence which had fallen on the trio.

It was a silence which had come upon an interchange of flatteries between the elderly idol and his young devotee, wherein each had presented the other with a piece of moral embroidery of unusual brilliancy, and both had accepted the offering with perfect good faith in its fitness.

Hortensia was at this moment sitting to Mr. Branscombe as Una. His model for the lion was one of those natural-history cards which are published for schools and coloured by the intelligent foreman of the printing-works. Mr. Branscombe had enlarged the copy and gone beyond the foreman in his reds and browns; so that he had made a very queer-looking thing on the whole, like nothing so much as a pin-cushion. Una was a respectable marionnette, a little dislocated; but the original was charmed with herself as seen on the canvas, and, her mind bringing the desire to find perfection, she found it.

"Have you heard of it, Stella?" asked Hortensia, in the patronizing tone which had become habitual to her now when addressing her elderly idol's unsatisfactory daughter.

"No," answered Stella, taken out of her own thoughts as by a violent wrench. "When did you hear it?—and when was he taken ill?"

"A few days ago. I know it from the Pennefathers. They called yesterday about a subscription for that old Reuben Norris who lives out at Barnes, and they told us. The little boy has some kind of dreadful fever. I do not know what it is, but he is very ill and Dr. Quigley thinks rather seriously of him."

"I should like to go and inquire," said Stella, rising with nervous haste.

"My dear, unreasonable, impulsive child!—a malignant fever of an unknown character, and you entering the house? Is that wise, my little daughter?" asked Mr. Branscombe, in a sweetly repressive manner—wisdom laying a large cool hand on the feverish head of folly. "A note by a servant will be sufficient."

"Should I run any danger, papa, by simply inquiring at the door?" asked Stella.

She was so unhappy herself, she felt as if she must go to Augusta who was even more unhappy. Community of sorrow seems somehow to soothe and lighten individual pain; and the folly of all this flattery between her father and Hortensia, always revolting, jarred on her to-day almost beyond bearing. If Randolph Mackenzie had been there she might have endured it better. As it was, the irritation that it roused in her was more than she could well suppress. She did not know how it had come about, but always, always now, she found herself set in some kind of antagonism to her father. And as for Hortensia—had she been able to do as she would, she would have cut short their friendly intimacy to a handshake on the Sunday, and would have felt the cessation of their daily intercourse almost as restful as sleep.

"No; you must not go," said Mr. Branscombe with less suavity and more decision.

"But, papa——" began Stella.

"If your father says not, Stella?" said Hortensia with a grave reproving air.

"My dear, do as you are bid;—write a note and send it by the groom," said Mr. Branscombe with still less suavity and still more decision. "Take a pattern from your excellent little friend and do not for ever dispute my will in this childish manner."

Stella did not answer. She felt terribly rebellious and impatient, and wanted to break out into open wrath against this excellent little friend; but she bit her lips with a vexed

air; held her peace; and wrote her note to Augusta saying that she would, if she could, call at the house to-morrow to learn all particulars. Then she sealed her envelope and sent off the note by the servant, and took up a piece of embroidery which suddenly had become as distasteful as everything else in life.

Hortensia was sitting absolutely like a statue. Her eyes were as fixed as if they had been of glass. Save for the light rise and fall of the severely-cut gown, covering her small childish bosom, she might have been a clothed and painted statue, lifeless for all eternity.

"How can you sit so still? I declare you do not even wink," suddenly cried Stella with odd petulance. "I should stiffen into stone if I sat as you do."

"But then I am not impatient," said Hortensia. "It is no trouble to me to sit still and think."

"You are the most perfect model in all respects," said Mr. Branscombe enthusiastically. "You were born for the studio."

"You are so good to say so! I am always so pleased when I do anything that pleases you—so proud to be praised by you!" said Hortensia with maidenly modesty, but turning her eyes on Mr. Branscombe with their well-known look of adoration.

"My praise will not content you for long, I am afraid," returned Finery Fred with a tender and regretful kind of gallantry, a marshalling, as it were, of his sixty winters in front of her nineteen summers. "Some day others, more appropriate, will give you the happiness that you ought to have; but none will be so sincere as those of your old friend at Rose Hill."

"Yours will content me for ever," said Hortensia, humble, devout, adoring.

He turned to her with a smile. It was the smile of handsome Fred Branscombe when he had picked up another foolish, fluttering little heart and was holding it in his hand as a study.

Stella flushed to the roots of her hair. She felt that things could not go on long as they were. Her dislike of Hortensia was growing daily, and would soon burst through the present bounds of prudence and reserve. She could not bear it much longer—she knew that she could not! Irritable, nervous, sore as she was to-day, this sentimental flirtation between her

father and the little Puritan tried her to the utmost. She did not see it as flirtation—that is not the word which she would have given it. She saw it more as an encroachment on her own domain, and was jealous, not of the future but of the present.

"I shall become quite jealous of you, Hortensia," she said in a forced manner—forced because attempting to be gay and careless while in reality she was angry and disturbed. "You make too much of papa."

"What an odd thing to say!" said Hortensia, opening her eyes with her now usual look of reproof. "Can any one make too much of your father?"

"His daughter apparently thinks so," said Mr. Branscombe, with what was meant to be a pained but always generous smile of magnanimity.

"I do not like any one to take my place," said Stella, laying her hand on her father's arm.

"Then you are not going to be jealous; you are so already," returned Hortensia with prim logic. "And to be jealous is to be naughty."

"I am not apt to feel things without a cause. If I am jealous I have cause," said Stella, with her array of logic.

"You have no cause, my dear Stella," said her father gravely.

"People are often jealous for no reason whatever. And Stella has none to be jealous of poor little insignificant me," said Hortensia with the deepest humility, tears coming into her eyes as she spoke.

"No daughter would like to feel that she was being supplanted," said Stella, flashing out the secret fire which was so difficult to damp down.

"It is too bad of you to say that!" said Hortensia angrily. "How cruel you are, Stella! I did not think you could have been so cruel!"

"Hush! hush, my children!" broke in Mr. Branscombe's level, artificial voice. "What a pair of foolish young creatures you are!" he added with a not displeased smile. He rather liked indeed, this little passage of arms of which he had been the cause, though it was only between a couple of children—of whom one was his own daughter. Still, it was better than nothing; and undoubtedly it both soothed and inspirited him. But now he turned to Stella.

"My dear," he said with his well-worn urbanity of manner; "no daughter need fear to be supplanted so long as she does

her duty. While you are conscious of doing your duty in a whole-hearted and unbroken chain of thoughts and actions, be not afraid of your charming little friend here, nor of any other. The fear and the remedy lie in your own hands. Your position with your father depends on yourself alone. Jealousy is the mark of a vulgar mind and a bad conscience: I do not wish to think you possess the one or the other. And now, my dear Una, attention, if you please. I am just at the delicate curves of your exceedingly dainty and difficult little mouth, and it is essential that we have peace and quiet. My Genius is a very Egeria, and needs the sweet influence of repose if she is to guide my hand to good work. So please remain as you are. You are perfect, my little friend—absolutely perfect!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TAKING BREATH.

The next few weeks passed quietly. Local history stood still, and nothing was afloat save the illness of Mrs. Latrobe's child, and the speculations of the neighbours as to whether Dr. Quigley would pull the little fellow through or no. Winter was slowly passing into spring—very slowly indeed—like the tardy waking of a sluggard who will not raise himself to active life; and the moment was emphatically one of suspended animation and taking breath all round.

To Stella it was as if she had come into a strange phase of existence where she had to learn a new language and forget her old songs. She and Randolph Mackenzie had now nothing to say to each other, and spent their time, when they were together, in staring blankly at the dead past. The fertile theme of converse was closed against them, and they stood in dumb distress before the shut gates of their forbidden pleasance. Cyril, who had been their one inexhaustible subject of living talk, lay now as a dumb, dead thing between them. They thought of nothing else, but they never spoke of him; and they had nothing else to speak of. Therefore, the presence of that good, honest-hearted if stupid-headed Pylades, which had always brought with it the reflected lustre of memory and association, became now as dark as the rest; and poor Stella had no more of that moonlight-coloured happiness, which until now it had been his appointed mission to bestow.

Also, without doubt, she had lost her old place with her father—and Hortensia Lyon had taken it; and as yet she scarcely understood the boundaries of her new sphere, or could say when or where Hortensia had dispossessed her. An odd kind of coolness had sprung up between daughter and father, which both felt and which neither would have confessed nor could perhaps have assigned to its exact cause. Certainly, she had broken down under the strain of her close attendance on him after her mother's death, so that he had been forced to have a secretary to do the work for which, since nature had so manifestly consecrated her, he thought that love should have made her strong enough. And she knew that he was disappointed and annoyed with her because of her failure—a failure which Hortensia always accentuated so bitterly and against which she placed in contrast herself and her devotion, as a shining statue of silver against a dull background of lead.

Yet Stella could not beg her father to let her take up her dropped burden. She could not!—no, not even if that should include his renewed approbation! She felt that it was better for both, and better even for her love for him, that she knew little of, and was associated not at all with, the life of that stifling studio. The work, in the admiration of which she had been brought up as in a fixed doctrine of righteousness, had become quite another thing to her of late from what it had been in the old days of reverent worship, when her mother had impressed on her, as the eleventh commandment, the majesty of papa's genius, the gloriousness of its results, and the indisputable right of the domestic Apollo to her very life and her first cares. Stella had not yet come to Mrs. Morshead's state of mind when she could call it all "horrid stuff" and "vile balderdash." That would have been a species of blasphemy still to her. But she was in the state when the paternal poetry and music were inexpressibly wearisome; when she had no kind of interest in the paternal pictures; and when the whole thing was to her dry husks and lifeless chaff. It was all her own fault, that she knew; still, there it was, and she could not conceal it from herself!

Beyond this unconfessed coolness because of her intellectual defection from her duty stood Hortensia, as even a graver cause for sorrow. Creeping into Stella's rightful place in Mr. Branscombe's heart, nearer and nearer as the days went on, the little Puritan was indeed taking that place which was the daughter's and should have remained hers to the end. But

how to cut the ground from under those stealthy crafty feet? She, Stella, could not tell her father that he was not to write odes and sonnets to Hortensia Lyon, because she, his daughter, was jealous and did not like it. Neither could she tell Hortensia that she was not to be her father's model, now as Una, now as Miranda, again as Evangeline, and again as only herself idealized, because she, her friend, was jealous of that too, and did not like it. She had to bear it quietly, whether she liked it or no; and her feelings in the matter made no part of the play.

Again, she knew that she was displeasing this dear father of hers about Valentine Cowley. He held to their frequent correspondence, and she, knowing all that she did, shrank from it as falsehood, treachery, desecration, and a dozen other bad things, like so many snakes in a basket. And Mr. Branscombe resented nothing so much as disobedience to his will. But that he should so hold to this correspondence was a puzzle which Stella could not understand, look at it how she would. He so careful, so delicate, so fastidious as he was about the conduct of women, to force her into this frequent interchange of letters with a young man for whom she had no special liking—to rebuke her as he did if her answers were too short, too tardy, too lifeless—and to praise the young fellow himself at the expense of all other men, and especially at the expense, by implication, of poor Cyril and his friend Randolph Mackenzie; what did it all mean? Over and over again that swift glance of terror at the coming awakening, which Sandro Kemp had once seen, translated itself into a rapid thought of doubt and anguish. No; it could not be called a thought; it had not formulated itself so plainly as that. It was only a vague sensation, a blinding flash of fear lest some day she should see clearly to find her father less than the godlike being she had been taught to believe him—his genius a sham behind which his vanity was the only living thing—that vanity the real cause of her mother's death—and his dealing with herself eminently and entirely cruel, selfish, unfair, and unfatherly. She did not think all this in so many set terms: she only dumbly feared and unconsciously foresaw. But just as the lagging spring, though slowly was surely awakening out of the sleep of winter, so would that drowsy sentiment of hers one day break into life and confession. And then all dumb doubt and love-created denial would be at an end.

Times were hard with poor Stella at this moment. Begin-

ning to unconsciously suspect the flimsy pretentiousness of her beloved father—a certain estrangement setting in between them—jealous of Hortensia, whose influence somehow wrought against her, she scarcely knew how—the girl was also unutterably distressed by this correspondence with Valentine Cowley. Forced on her by the one to whom she would naturally have looked for protection against an intimacy which she herself did not desire, what could she do? Every week Val wrote to her one or more long, long letters, to which she sometimes said to her father, passionately, she would not reply. For rare as passion used to be with Stella in the days gone by, it was unhappily by no means infrequent now; and if her father sometimes said he did not know his child—his sweet and placid child—in the irritable and nervous rebel whose will so often came into collision with his own, Stella did not know herself. She used to be dreadfully sorry and ashamed of herself; she would resolve to be more patient and self-restrained another time; not to let little things annoy her as they did; not to be so irritable with Hortensia; not to be so strange and sore with her father. Yet something stronger than herself seemed to possess her on the next occasion, and she stood before the dark shadow of her new self terrified, repentant, but somehow unable to do better.

If only she could cut short this correspondence with Valentine Cowley! She thought that everything would go so much more smoothly if she were but fairly rid of this oppressive incubus. How she hated those long letters of his, all about nothing, as they were, yet always with a secret thread, a hidden core, which she would not recognize and could not deny! This last, over the answer to which she and her father had had something like a quarrel, what nonsense it all was! She cared nothing for the "Earthly Paradise," nor for the "Stones of Venice;" the "Story of the Golden Fleece," nor that of the "Apples of the Hesperides;" the description of the old church at Torcello and the meaning of its architecture, nor for the fine fancy which tossed up in solid foam the cupolas of St. Mark, and that, as fine, which chronicled the deed. All this was of course intellectually true enough, she dared say, but she really had no interest in it; and still less in the little undercurrent of personal application which carried these surface-flowers of eloquence to their destination. And when her father, to whom she gave the letter unopened, launched out in praise of its beauty of

thought and picturesqueness of expression, its tender tone of poetry, its sweet religiousness of feeling, and called on her to laud with him the writer of such an admirable essay, she could not bring herself to be his echo—she could not, and she would not! Nor would she answer this letter itself. A few significant phrases embedded in the more purely literary mass frightened and repelled her. Val once spoke of the future in connection with her as a mysterious happiness lying in his way; and once he hinted at the time when he should be able to direct her mind to his favourite subjects more thoroughly than now, and to take joy in her companionship on his special line of thought. The words came in quite naturally and as if born of the preceding phrases. All the same they revolted Stella; and she felt that she must put a stop to this correspondence before she had been further committed.

She was not a girl to think a man in love with her because he liked her society. And of herself she had not seen in Val what the outside world had detected clearly enough. But she was by no means a fool, and had her possibilities of enlightenment free of vanity, like others. And she had been enlightened, as we know. Wherefore it was that she suddenly took her stand, and, in spite of her father's displeasure, said with strange passion:

"Papa! I will not write any more to Mr. Cowley. His letters do not interest me. I am tired of them."

"My will, my dear Stella, is that you do write," her father answered with quiet firmness and majestic decision.

"You will not force me when it is so much against my inclination?" said Stella, turning to him a white face and a pair of dark, wide-opened eyes.

"I would have your inclination run parallel with my own," was his reply.

"It cannot, papa. I hate these letters!" said Stella warmly. "Why should I write to a young man like Mr. Cowley?" she continued indignantly. "He is the only man to whom I do write—why should I to him? I do not care for him half as much as I care for James Pennefather, or even for poor dear noisy Jack; and I do not write to them."

"My dear, when you can compare a young man of Mr. Valentine Cowley's superior acquirements to two such earthworms, such mere clods and beetles as the Pennefathers, it is

time to close the conversation. I shall have you next bring on the field my groom or my gardener's lad;—you would not range on an appreciably lower level if you did!"

"Papa!" remonstrated Stella.

"You and I, my dear Stella, do not agree in our tastes, I am sorry to say," continued her father loftily. "You prefer matter to mind in all directions. Between your little friend Horteusia, with her delicate organization and pearly purity, and the coarse fibre of Mrs. Latrobe, you choose the latter; between this noble youth, this Admirable Crichton, Mr. Valentine Cowley, and that clod-like Mr. Randolph Mackenzie, with his companion clods the Pennefathers, you prefer these latter two. No; undoubtedly we do not agree, my dear Stella, in our estimate of the best things in human nature; and I am sorry for it."

"That has nothing to do with my writing to Mr. Valentine Cowley," said Stella; "and," she added with strange rebelliousness; "I do not think I should be forced to do it when I do not like it."

"You are not forced; you do it because I wish it," said her father, suddenly setting his sails to the old tack.

"And you will not wish it if I so much dislike it?" said Stella, with as sudden a return to her old coaxing and caressing manner.

"For this once, oblige me," said her father, smoothing the hair from her forehead and kissing her gently—"for this once."

And poor Stella was conquered, as he knew she would be.

Valentine was by this time feverishly in love with Cyril's former fiancée. He knew the elementary rules about preparing the ground and sowing the seed before you can expect to garner; nevertheless, scientific knowledge did not supply practical wisdom, and he wanted his harvest before the grain had had time to ripen. Left to his own fancy, which was active, he thought himself more and more in love than he had been even when in the presence of his Beautiful Lady, as he called her for his latest designation—and he made up his own mind without knowing whether Stella's would ever be brought into harmony therewith. She was his Supreme; and he intended to marry her. He felt sure of her father's consent; so sure, indeed, that had anything been able to throw him off his intention, it would have been Mr. Branscombe's too evident desire to call him son-in-law. The consent of his own parents

was also a foregone conclusion; for the Branscombes were their own social equals all round; Stella herself was unexceptionable; and, what was more to the purpose perhaps, in their estimate of things, she would not come empty-handed. If he had chosen Georgie Pennefather he would not have been quite so sure of a home-welcome to his bride. The Pennefathers were also the Cowleys' equals so far as birth and social position went—but the girl herself! Mrs. Cowley was fastidious about the girls of her acquaintance, and the picture of a daughter-in-law who laughed and talked slang and rollicked, as Georgie and her twin Dove and all belonging to them laughed and talked and rollicked generally, made Valentine sometimes laugh and sometimes feel a little qualm—which was a very good substitute for remorse.

Meanwhile he was passionately and honourably in love with his equal in all things—his equal whom he intended to marry—his present ideal and Cyril Ponsonby's former lover —Stella Branscombe.

Stella was not actively ill, but she was on the verge of that state called generically "breaking down;" and Dr. Quigley made it his business to go as often to Rose Hill as he could find any excuse for a visit. He had of late found an excellent one, having dug out of the mining population a young fellow who had a talent for painting and whose sketches he brought to Mr. Branscombe, ostensibly for that gentleman's valuable criticism. In reality it was to be able to ask Stella this question about herself and to make that inquiry of Jane Durnsford; to be able to give those sharp prominent collar-bones of hers a few ringing taps beneath his long lean fingers; every now and then to listen to her heart and lungs with the stethoscope to his large flat ear; to make sure that no vital mischief had as yet set in, and to make also sure that she was taking his medicine regularly, and, if not gaining good, yet staving off evil. He was pulling Augusta's child through with all his known skill and care, and he intended, when the little fellow should be well enough, to send him and his mother to the seaside; and Stella should go with them. This was his design for the immediate future. Meanwhile and for the present he, like all the rest, held his breath.

Colonel Moneypenny was perplexed. He could not tell what was false and what was true in that fair widow's conduct. It was odd if she had not seen that notice which his jealous eye devoured so greedily immediately after she had

left. Yet would she have perpetrated such an unblushing falsehood as was this denial of hers, at least by implication if not by direct assertion? Yet again, if she had not seen it, what had changed her manner with such strange suddenness between his leaving the room and returning after so short an interval? It was an odd little thornbush, looked at all round. He could not see his way through it; and, as a gentleman, he was bound to accept her word that there was nothing to see. He intended to try his fate definitely when the boy was better. Until then he must wait, ponder, hope—was it hope? —and fight with his wild beast of jealousy, doubt and wounded pride, as well as he knew how.

On her side Mrs. Morshead was softened by this illness of the child to a degree that took her household by surprise. And she was out of sorts herself. So far she admitted, but no more. She had a mysterious something amiss with her of which she never made confession. She rejected with scorn the proposition to "speak to Dr. Quigley," when she looked so ill and walked so feebly, and was evidently in so much suffering that both her daughter and her maid saw for themselves what she hid with so much care from all the world. She believed in him for that "poor fellow," her grandson, but for herself she despised him as she would despise any other quack or humbug. So Augusta need not give herself the trouble to ask her. She knew what she was about, and the least said the soonest mended, at all times.

She said this sharply enough; still, with less than her usual acrimony; for since the boy's illness she had been almost humane to her daughter—certainly, if not positively loving, yet negatively inoffensive, and even taking a little care not to add her usual tale of thongs and whips to the poor young widow's scorpions of anxiety.

The neighbourhood too, interested in the boy, came often to The Laurels; and this frequent influx of visitors a little diverted the lonely old woman. Colonel Moneypenny came perhaps the most frequently. He never saw Augusta; never once; but that perennial Hope of man kept up a steady flame of expectation on every occasion, and the terrible old woman had the good of the light.

In this universal attention paid to her for the sake of her daughter, the acrid humour of the mistress of The Laurels was somewhat sweetened and her bitter tongue had a certain respite. Even the Pennefathers got off with fewer rebukes

than usual, and she scoffed with less malignant verve at Finery Fred and all his affectation. To Stella she was almost maternal and very nearly affectionate; and, now that no one said so and she was not bound by the law of her being to deny and contradict, she saw for herself how close the girl was to that one step which goes over the border of Time into the abyss of Eternity. She told Mr. Branscombe to his face, sharply and curtly as her manner was, that he was not fit to have the care of a nice girl like that. Any one with only half an eye, she said, not to speak of four—looking contemptuously at the pince-nez on that long, straight handsome nose—could see that poor dear Stella was next thing to gone; and it was a shame and a sin not to look after her better! What would her dear mother have said to see her neglected like this? Never a woman to make sure that she was taken care of, to boil her up a comfortable posset at nights, or to see that she wore flannels next her skin and put her feet into hot water—it was a sin and a shame; and so she told him; and some of these fine days he would be sorry for it and wish that he had taken friendly advice when it was offered. But men were a poor lot, take them all round; and for her part she did not see what good they were in the world at all! They only rampaged about and put all things into confusion; and women had nothing else to do but attend to their humours, and see that they had their buttons sewn on and their shirt-fronts starched and ironed like so much glazed card-board—give them good dinners, and treat them like a parcel of overgrown school-boys, as they were. But not while she had a tongue in her head would she refrain from telling the truth—no, not if she had to die for it! And the truth was that Stella was looking downright dreadful, and in a very little while she would lose all her beauty if she went on like this; and then where would she be?

"Where she is now, my dear madam," answered Mr. Branscombe grandly; "in her father's home and heart."

"Her father's fiddlesticks," snapped the vulgar old creature crossly. "Better have given her to that young man when you were about it! She was fond of him; as she ought to have been, seeing that she was engaged to him and made fuss enough over him. A father's home and heart are not as good as a husband's to a nice girl like that; and it was downright cruelty to keep her back as you did, Mr. Branscombe! She has never been the same creature since. And

any one but yourself could see that she is breaking her heart now!—any one. Ah, it takes a mother to learn these things!" she added, with unconscious contradiction, wishing to punish her adversary by this allusion to his good Matilda.

"Providence has denied her the continuance of the one good parent, but I think I have somewhat successfully supplied the hiatus," said Mr. Branscombe with rigid stateliness.

"And I don't," said Mrs. Morshead snappishly.

"There, my dear madam, we must agree to differ," answered Stella's father with a superior smile. "You, on your part, doubtless think that you have successfully supplied the place of father to your daughter and to your little grandson. In like manner, I claim credence for the faithful and fit performance of my delegated duties. If we fail, you and I, we fail in concert; and neither can say 'le peché de mon voisin.'"

"God bless my heart and soul!" said Mrs. Morshead with satirical disdain. "Your language is beyond me," she added. "I am only a plain, rough, everyday body and you are superfine and gilt-edged all over. You always make me think of musk and white-kid gloves; and I am sure you must live chiefly on butter and honey, you are so soft and silky."

"I thank you for the compliment, Mrs. Morshead," said Finery Fred smiling sweetly. "You have expressed to the letter the character I wish to have and the impression I hope and endeavour to make. Refinement and softness—what a flatterer, my dear madam, you are! Ah! who could ever call Mrs. Morshead rough?—not I for one!"

"Then I am sorry, Mr. Branscombe," said Mrs. Morshead grimly. "I am proud of being called rough, for that means true; and if you call me soft I know that I have done and said something that I should not."

"Ah, you are a wag, my dear madam, a wag!" said Mr. Branscombe airily. "You really are supreme good company! But I must tear myself away, else I should like to enjoy your pleasant society for hours longer. Au revoir, chère madame; à bientôt," he said, knowing that Mrs. Morshead hated French phrases as much as she hated flattery. And with this he bunched up his long white fingers into a knot and blew the old woman a gallant kiss, leaving her speechless with disgust and vexation.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BY THE SEASIDE.

Really his daughter's health was getting to be almost as great a nuisance to Mr. Branscombe as her love-affair with Cyril Ponsonby! It broke in on the rhythm of his thoughts, interfered with his habits, disturbed his reflections and annoyed him all through. So that when Dr. Quigley told him, brusquely enough, to pack off his girl to the seaside with Mrs. Latrobe and her little boy, albeit Augusta's companionship was theoretically against his idea of fitness, he assented to the proposal, not only without demurrer but with a decided feeling of relief from a very real and pressing personal annoyance.

At one time it would have seemed impossible that Stella's father should have become thus painfully estranged from the Star of his House—the smiling, dimpled object of his graceful paternal love—the sweet inspiration of his domestic muse. And at one time Stella would have thought it impossible that she should have left that dear papa and Rose Hill with a sense of escape from duress into freedom, from sickliness into health, from falsehood and make-believe into reality and truth. But times had changed with both; and each knew the fact, if Stella had not enough moral hardihood to acknowledge all her share. Indeed, had she understood herself and read her father, she would have held her life to have come to an end for all its happiness and all its worth.

On his side however, Finery Fred had never lacked the courage which acknowledges things as they are and confesses when the loving have ceased to please and the beloved to be of value. There was no weak allowance with him of this fault or that folly, accepted with the rest, quand même. If his dearest failed, they failed; and if they were in his way they were, and must be removed. He believed in the value of mental repose for the artistic nature, and held that the poet's soul should never be vexed whatever happened. And as his work in life was the creation of beauty, so he said, all which told against that work must be eliminated from his path, as you would remove logs and orange-peel from the track of a runner. And as Stella had, unfortunately for herself, proved of late an obstruction and a cause of vexation to

his soul, he had the courage to say so when he took private counsel with himself and balanced incompleteness here with fulfilment there.

"She annoys me," he said, as he sat, pen in hand, unable to write the "Song to the Sweet South Wind" (Hortensia) which had presented itself to him in the watches of the night —unable to "sing," as he called it, because so full of his daughter's ill-health, changed temper, want of proper affection for her incomparable little friend, evident fretting after that young clown pig-sticking out there in India, and felt if not expressed indifference to his own work. "She annoys me; and I should do better without her. She has changed since the rupture of her foolish engagement and has become morose and disagreeable. She does not respect my genius as she ought and at one time did; from a help she has become a hindrance. It is well that she leaves me for a while. The wheels will run more smoothly without her; and, if I can, I will remove her altogether!"

Pondering over chances and probabilities, and dreadfully out of humour with that once radiant and now undeniably dingy Star, Mr. Branscombe sat down and composed one of his most elegant epistles for the benefit of Mr. Valentine Cowley. He began by telling his dear young friend, his Admirable Crichton, Himself Redivivus, that he was despoiling himself of his sweet child's invaluable companionship, and sending her to St. Ann's under the care of Mrs. Latrobe, who had obligingly offered to be her chaperon and caretaker. He hoped his dear love would not be dull. He himself would go to see her soon after her installation; and perhaps, he added significantly, other friends more suitable to her age than even a fond father would find themselves in her neighbourhood before long. It would be a favourable moment for reflection and deep-seated impression; and he trusted that his dear young friend would do what he could for his sweet child's solace and amusement while by the solemn shores of the sounding sea. He looked on them as brother and sister, he said, and only wished that heaven had sent him such a son for himself—such a brother for his daughter.

He made the letter specially long and friendly; for, in spite of her natural loyalty, Stella had kept her promise of reply to Valentine's last effusion only to the ear and in no wise to the hope, and had written so curtly that in effect she need not have written at all. Wherefore Mr. Branscombe, irate on

this point also against his Star, took the thing into his own hands, hoping that the warm light of a father's friendship might shed a ruddy glow over a daughter's frozen indifference. It was his design to keep Mr. Valentine Cowley on the stocks so long as was possible, and not to let him slip off into deep water if to be held by any chain or cable known to man. He wanted Stella to marry, and he intended that she should marry the heir of Greyhurst Manor. If there was power left in a father's will she should be the young man's wife before the year was out; and then he himself—Handsome Fred Branscombe—well; what of himself? Who knows what passed through his mind as he looked at his face in the glass, scanning every square inch of his skin with microscopic minuteness of observation, then drawing himself up smiling and saying half aloud: "Handsome Fred Branscombe still!"

Wherefore he wrote Mr. Valentine Cowley a letter, which was substantially an offer of Stella's hand and an assurance that his own would be accepted, and which held behind those more evident lines the filmy network of an undeclared resolve —cost what it might, a resolve that should find issue in fact.

How delightful it was at the seaside! St. Ann's, one of the loveliest places on the whole north-coast of England, never looked so lovely as now in the bright months of early spring, when the clouds were so tender and the clear vault of heaven against which they rested was as blue as the sky of Italy and as clear as that which flashes down on the glaciers of the Engadine—when the sweet wild-flowers dyed the cliffs and meadows golden and pink and silver by turns, and scented the green lanes with perfume that was as subtle as a spirit and as full of fragrant harmonies as a song—when the resinous larches of the inland woods caught the sunlight in their rose-red tassels to give back in odour what they received in colour—when the sea seemed younger and fresher, more vigorous and more vitalized than usual, answering to the renewed freshness and vitality of the earth.

It was like another and better state of existence to Stella to sit here amongst the rocks, either alone or with Augusta and her boy. Sheltered from the wind and turned full to the light of the beautiful sea, she dreamed herself in Italy; and was sure that not even the cliffs of Sorrento nor the sheltered bays of Capri could give more exquisite delight in mere existence than that which she felt now on this North of England coast. The sense of peace which came upon her was as infinite

as that of healing; and she felt as if part of the heavy burden of her sorrow were slipping from her as she forgot herself in the love of that Great Mother who holds all the gifts of peace and health in her benign hand. And what a charming companion Augusta was! The more she was known the nicer she proved herself to be. Friends the two had ever been, so far as a young girl and a married woman ten years her senior can be friends. But they grew nearer and nearer together in the sweet solitude, the near intimacy of their present life; and it seemed to Stella as if the checked and troubled current of her affections had once more a clear and pleasant outfall, and that Augusta brought back to her something of the beloved mother whom she had lost and of the young lover whom she had renounced.

On the brink of becoming morbid as she was, Stella could not have found a more wholesome companion than Augusta Latrobe. Sympathetic in nature and soft in speech, the widow was essentially cheerful, strong, and above all things unromantic. She was the essence of common-sense wisdom warmed by kindness and spiced with a genuine love of fun and pleasure. She was undoubtedly what people would call worldly; but she was not selfish nor inhuman. She thought that life held more than the simple affections—especially that affection between man and woman which goes by the name par excellence of love. It held for her ease of circumstance and solidity of social position, peace at home, and above all, duty such as she owed to her boy; and nothing seemed to her so foolish as useless regrets and meaningless sentimentality. Her favourite two axioms were: "Break or bear" for the first part, and "Life lies before and not behind us" for the second. When things had perforce to be borne, it was essential, she said, that they should be borne with the dignity of cheerfulness. And when a loss is eternal and irreparable, we must bury our sorrow deep in the shadow of the grave which lies behind us, and press forward with hope and courage to the future before us.

She had lived in the practice of these principles for herself, and she applied them now to Stella. Cyril Ponsonby was done with. That act of the girl's life drama was ended to all appearances for ever; the page was turned down; and Augusta Latrobe allowed no weak peering through the closed leaves, no vain attempt to reconstruct the stage. The seal of fate was set; and of what use tears and sighs? What was done, was

done. Now to the future, and what had to come; and the widow, like Mr. Branscombe, would, if she could, turn that future to the benefit of Mr. Valentine Cowley as the best portion that Stella could expect for her share.

It was at the breakfast-table one morning when the first loophole was opened, where the reasonable, calm-judging friend could lay her guns and whence she could take her aim. The letters were brought in; three—all in masculine handwriting—were for Stella. One was from her father, one from Randolph Mackenzie, the third was from Valentine Cowley. To Augusta came none at all.

"Upon my word, young lady," laughed the widow pleasantly; "you are, what those vulgar little Pennefather girls would call 'going the pace.' Three letters, all from gentlemen! Come, confess—from whom?"

"Papa," said Stella, taking up one and kissing the envelope. "Dear papa! This is from that good Randolph Mackenzie. I know his handwriting, but this is the first time he has written to me—I wonder about what—" a little anxiously, one might almost say with embarrassment. "And this," she said, tossing down the third with what was saved from being indifference only by displeasure; "this is from Valentine Cowley. How tiresome he is!"

"And why tiresome, ma belle? And why, if tiresome, do you write to him at all or allow him to write to you?—more especially after what I told you the other day, and what not only I but every one else can see? Why, Stella! where is your logic and reasonableness in all this, my dear?"

"It is not my fault," said Stella hastily. "I do not wish either to write to or hear from him. If I had my own way I would never see nor hear from him again. He worries me to death, Augusta; and I am not to blame."

"So? then by whose will is it? Mr. Cowley's or your father's, or both?"

"Papa's," answered Stella in a low voice.

She had to tell the truth if she said anything at all; and though she did not like making what seemed to her such a damaging statement against her father, still she was bound to do so; and it was a relief to explain the whole position to her friend.

"He makes you correspond with Mr. Cowley against your will?" asked Augusta.

"Yes," said Stella.

"And Mr. Cowley knows that it is against your will?"

"I try to make him feel it," she answered with a little flash.

"But he perseveres?"

"Yes."

"He writes often?"

"Yes; once a week always, and sometimes twice. I hate his letters! I cannot tell you how much I hate them!" said Stella with a petulant gesture, throwing half-across the table that which had just come in and which she had not opened.

"Has he made you an offer yet?" asked the widow in her matter-of-fact way, probing with that firm, direct, assured touch of surgeons who put you to torture and pretend that you scarcely feel.

"No!" said Stella with indignant energy.

"But he makes love in his letters? He does not write, I suppose, only about the colour of the clouds or the last new poem?"

"He makes a great many silly speeches," answered Stella, with a curious mixture of annoyance and reluctance.

"And you could not possibly like him? You could not make up your mind to marry him?" asked Augusta, still serenely unconscious of giving pain while she turned the knife with a steady hand and pushed the probe still deeper into the wound.

"Augusta! never! never! Marry Valentine Cowley? I would rather die first!" said Stella, with as much passion of denial as if she had been asked. Could she commit murder or plan a forgery?

"You might do worse. He is a nice young fellow. You might indeed do worse, my dear," said Augusta.

"I am much obliged to you for your estimate, but I do not think I could do much worse!" said Stella, holding her head high and speaking in an offended tone.

Decidedly that dear girl's temper had not improved of late! There was no danger now of her sweetness wearying by its uniformity—of the smooth and limpid serenity of the waters fatiguing the onlooker for want of the pleasant change of ripple and ruffle! She had developed of late quite a refreshing amount of irritability, in which her nature clothed itself as in a new dress with fresh appointments. And as it was that kind of irritability which is without bitterness and without personal application—which is due only to an uncomfortable state of the nerves and to a "run-down" condition of the

health in general—it did not seriously affront those to whom it was shown. She was distinctly cross at times; but it was crossness which exhausted itself in a breath; crossness which was born and then died in a moment and which did no one any real harm while it lasted.

Augusta smiled to herself at the girl's little "spurt." It did not affect her the least in the world. What she had to say should be said, whether it made her companion cross or not. She had to have the thing out and do what she could to make oil and vinegar mix.

"Then, Stella, dear girl, if you feel all this, and are so set and determined, you should not write to him nor let him write to you," said the widow, very quietly but very firmly. "It is scarcely fair to him and certainly not right to yourself."

"But what can I do?—papa makes me," said the girl, her irritability gone and self-reproach remaining. Her doctrine of filial obedience had not been lessened because her belief in paternal perfection was somewhat diminished. Her father's will still represented to her the most righteous obligation of her life; and though she could not obey cheerfully in this matter of Valentine Cowley, nevertheless she did not disobey. Perhaps things would have been better if she had been less conscientious and more self-willed.

"Your father evidently wishes you to marry Mr. Cowley," then said Augusta, summing up the whole question. "And he does what he can to encourage the young man's hopes. If you really do not intend to marry him, you would do better to disobey your father now than to disappoint him afterwards. You will do less harm; for, as things are, you are giving poor Valentine false hopes which will make your future refusal only the more severe. Take my advice, Stella—either break off this correspondence which is doing harm all round, or make up your mind to marry the young fellow when you are asked."

"Do not say that, Augusta," said Stella with a solemn kind of earnestness, a tone almost of menace in her voice.

"I tell you again that you might do worse," repeated the widow drily. "He is a nice young fellow on the whole; and Greyhurst Manor would be a most charming home for you."

"Do not talk like that, Augusta! You are so sweet and good when you are your best self! I cannot bear to hear you so worldly! Do not be vexed with me. What would Grey-

hurst Manor be to me if I did not love the man?—and how could I ever love Mr. Cowley?"

"And why not?"

"Augusta!" said Stella revolted.

"Greyhurst Manor would be a lovely home whatever the man," continued Augusta, not noticing that interjection and pursuing her theme with her most provoking air of genial good sense, of heartless reasonableness. "And if you did not begin with all that tremendous amount of nonsense which some girls think necessary, you would end in the placid contentment which comes from habit, ease of position and mutual respect. And I assure you, Stella child, habit and respect and enough money for all your wants and a good social position and a nice house, and all that kind of thing, go farther to make a happy marriage than the romantic enthusiasm and blind adoration of the phantom which goes by the name of love. If you could bring yourself to marry Valentine Cowley you would be much happier than you are now, or perhaps ever will be. But if you cannot," she went on to say, stopping Stella as she was about to speak; "at least do not let him believe that you will. Father or not, do not be induced to play with him now only to disappoint him in the end."

"How impossible it is to do right!" said Stella with a quick sigh of impatience. "We are taught from our childhood to obey our parents as the first duty in life, for in obeying them we are obeying God—and when we are older, if we do as they tell us, we do wrong."

"Because we always do wrong when we make a fetish for ourselves, which we worship beyond reason;" said Augusta. "The only safe guide in life is common sense; and that is the rarest of all. Not the finest virtue in the world—not the most necessary—can stand the strain of excess; and even obedience to parents can be carried to excess—as in the matter of yours with Valentine Cowley. So now, after this lecture let us go out. It is a sin to waste the sunshine."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LOVER'S LEAP.

At every seaside place, where there are cliffs and rocks worthy of the name, are sure to be found a Smuggler's Leap and a Smuggler's Cave, round which are gathered fierce

traditions having still the power to stir the blood and rouse the imagination. Sometimes there is a Lover's Leap instead of the Smuggler's, where tragedy takes the place of romantic crime and the sympathy is all on the side of the sufferer. At St. Ann's there was of course the due amount of local interest and tradition; for the coast was wild and rock-bound; and in the old days of high duties and strict Protection it had been famous for the boldness of its law-breakers and the success with which their daring ventures had been made. Shreds and ends of fine Flanders lace were still among the cottage heirlooms of the fisher folk; here a louis d'or and there a Spanish doubloon was hung against the walls or laid in the bowl of the quaint Venetian vase with the twisted threads of white run through the stem; and the odour of cognac and schiedam seemed to linger yet in the air. But all these stirring times were past now—put to death by the prosaic facts of free-trade and the coastguard; and only memories and traditions remained of this bold Will Watch, or that more terrible Paul Jones—only here and there a blood-stained grave marked the last resting-place and crystallized the history of some wild desperado whom nature had designed for a hero and of whom fate had made a ruffian and fortune an outlaw. Still, all these memories and old-world stories gave a kind of historical point and meaning to places, which surrounded them with human interest and lifted them into the regions of poetry and romance.

The most beautiful of all these places at St. Ann's was the Lover's Leap; and the story was as pathetic as the place was picturesque. It was the old, old story of loving not wisely but too well; of parental cold-blooded denial and youthful hot-headed passion; of love strong as death and greater than fear; of the youth who jumped into the sea from his pursuers and was saved; of the maid who flung herself in after him in despair, and was lost. And partly because she was love-lorn in her own life, and naturally therefore given to sentimental sympathies, and partly because the spot was so beautiful, Stella's favourite resting-place was on the rocks just below that fatal cliff whence the man had struck out to safety and the girl had sunk down to death.

"How true to life!" she thought sadly, as she sat there in front of the placid sea and under the shadow of the overhanging rocks. How true to her own history! Cyril had struck out into the smooth waters of indifference, where

another love would save him; she had gone down like a stone under the black waves of despair whence she should never be rescued by living hand! How true to the difference between man and woman! she thought again, woman-like, heaping on the collective man all that bitterness of blame which is only the other side of individual love. Yes, the strong man struck out and was saved, and the weak woman, who loved him, went down and was lost.

So she sat, mournfully dreaming—her eyes shut as though she were sleeping; while Augusta and her boy, out there in the bright, wholesome sunlight, slipped about among the sea-weed and the rocks, looking for sea-anemones, catching the little baby crabs running distractedly through the tiny shallows left by the receded tide, and picking up the tropical shells which had been brought from the far-off regions of the sun by the strong north current to the shores of bonny Cumberland.

The child's happy voice and Augusta's cheerful tones came upon the girl's ear like echoes from another life as she lay there dreaming, with those melancholy visions of loneliness and despair, those sad thoughts of ruin and disappointment, grouped round her like shadowy spectres. But they roused her and made her ashamed of this slothful indulgence of unavailing sorrow. Selfish, silly, weak, contemptible—she called herself all sorts of hard names as she resolutely cleared her brain of these misleading mildewing spectres. She sat up with a strong stiff back, as a reasonable woman should—no longer lounging against the rocks sunk in that slothful reverie of speechless sadness. She took off her hat and let the wind raise and ruffle her pretty hair; passed her hands over her eyes as if clearing them from the lingering heaviness of sleep; opened the book in her hand and glanced at the page where she had left off; looked out on the sea and watched Augusta and her boy—their figures dark against the shining waves and glittering sand; and again she felt the glad glow of young blood in her veins, the glory of life, and that all was not lost to her even though Cyril Ponsonby were parted from her for ever. There was love still left in the world; there was beauty; and there was always duty with work. No; all was not lost, though she should never be any man's wife, and never love again. Still, the present was good, and the future was not the hopeless wreck which but a few moments ago it had seemed to her to be. So, full

of renewed courage and cheerfulness, she began again on her book, which was Julian Sturgis's delightful story of "An Accomplished Gentleman."*

What a charming story it was! she thought; how easy in its style, how graceful and playful!—how it touched the surfaces of things with such a light and pleasant hand, and yet was not shallow! Still, something in the story pained her. Something in the circumstances, not in the character—no, certainly not in the character—of Hugo Deane reminded her so horribly of her own dear father! It was like a bad caricature, where the resemblance is undeniable but where the likeness is detestable. She hated herself that such a thing should come to her; but she could not chase it entirely away, though she banished it to the background of a mere uneasy consciousness. Her dear papa like Hugo Deane? Certainly not! The one was true, the other false—the one a genius and the other only a sham; and it was sacrilege to connect the two together. So, resolutely refusing to acknowledge the likeness which her consciousness could not deny, she went on reading as if her whole life's interest were concentrated in the tale.

Suddenly a man's hasty step on the shingle made her look up, when, to her infinite dismay, she saw the tall, handsome figure of Valentine Cowley striding over the loose stones and rubble towards her. A letter, still unopened, from him this morning, and now he himself at noon! What did it mean? and why had he come?

He came up to her and held out his hand, as with the other he took off his hat and stood bareheaded in the sun. What a happy smile on his fine face matched the living light of that lustrous sun! Really it was a fine face, if not a beloved one. Even Stella, though she did not love it, was forced to confess its beauty. His lithe young figure looked instinct with life and strength, with the daring of his youth, the confident satisfaction of his present place and future certainties. He was of the kind to whom life and the land belong by nature and inheritance; of the kind consecrated by fate to take boldly what he meant to hold firmly.

* Just at this part of my story I read for the first time Mr. Sturgis's pleasant novel. I was painfully struck with a certain coincidence of character and idea in his Hugo Deane and my own Fred Branscombe; and I make this explanation here to save myself from the charge of plagiarism and to express my keen appreciation of the elder work.

As her hand lay in his he drew a breath that was like a joyous interjection.

"I thought I should find you down here!" he said, laughing with simple happiness. This sudden straight discovery was like a good omen. "Had I not a fine instinct?" he asked. "They told me that you had gone down to the sea-shore, and I came here straight as a bird flies—made a bee-line and fell upon you as if I had known already."

Stella's face stiffened, paled, grew as prim as if she were Hortensia in spirit and herself only in form.

"How do you do, Mr. Cowley?" she said coldly, pulling away her hand from his and neither expressing surprise nor offering welcome.

"Did you not expect me?" he asked, his spirits dropping to zero.

"No," she answered, with the finest little accent of disdain, as if the question were in itself an impertinence. Why should she have expected him? Why thought of him at all?

"Did you not receive my letter?" he asked again. "I told you that I was coming to-day. Have you not had a letter from me this morning? You ought. It was posted in right time."

Stella looked a little confused.

"Yes, there was a letter from you," she said.

"But I told you that I was coming!" persisted Val.

"I have not read it yet," said Stella in a tone of studied indifference.

Valentine's fair face flushed with sudden anger. The slight implied in her words and emphasized by her manner, hit him hard; and even a man in love is susceptible to what he must call an impertinence, though it comes from the beloved. The difference between this and a like offence from another lies in the ease with which he forgives, and the odd transformation of anger into humility and offended dignity into abject entreaty.

"I am sorry you find my letters of so little interest that you do not care even to read them," he said.

"I do not think I ever gave you reason to believe that they did interest me so very much!" said Stella in her most unpleasant voice and manner.

"Pray give me back my morning's unfortunate epistle—the letter that you have not cared even to open—and let me

destroy it," said Val, the flush still on his face and his voice studiously cold and haughty.

"I have not got it with me," said Stella, cold and haughty without study. "I left it on the breakfast table; but you are welcome to destroy it when you go back to the house."

"Stella!" cried Val impulsively.

"Mr. Cowley!" returned Stella, indignant at the familiarity of the address.

"I expected a different reception from this I must confess," said Val, his mood melting and his anger changing, as it was certain to do, from wrath to sorrow. "I did not think you would receive me so coldly, so cruelly. I expected some kind of welcome from you."

"Why should you?" answered Stella quickly. "I never let you suppose that I would welcome you if you came here, Mr. Cowley;—quite the contrary."

"Your father told me he would be glad if I came, and that you would be glad too," said Valentine.

"You are papa's friend and he likes you," answered Stella stiffly. "Papa spoke as he felt for himself; but even he has no right to speak for me."

This was a tremendous bit of self-assertion on the part of the girl who had been born and bred in the faith of filial submission; but the exigencies of the moment were strong, and she must assert herself if she would not be swamped in the heavy wash where she found herself.

"Then I am not your friend?" said Val sorely.

"You are an acquaintance," said Stella, a little less coldly than before. She hated to give pain even when it was as necessary as now. "I have no young men friends—except Randolph Mackenzie," she added. "I am not the kind of girl to have them."

"But girls do not keep up a correspondence with acquaintances—only acquaintances," said Val with an imprudent accent of reproach in his voice to match the reproach in his heart.

Stella's eyes, usually so mild and of late so mournful, flashed at this with a sudden blaze of indignation.

"I was forced to write to you," she said proudly. "Papa wished it. I do not know why, but he did; and I wrote to please him, because he made me, and not of my own free will."

"I am sorry that you have been forced into anything so

unpleasant against your will," said Valentine Cowley, the touchwood of his pride again taking fire. But the fire was not long-lived, and when he turned away his head something moved over his eyes that felt like tears.

The girl's soft heart smote her. She did not like to see this tall, fine, strong young fellow so suddenly humiliated, so strangely cast down and softened. She felt that he had, or thought he had, the right to reproach her as he liked. Had not Augusta said so? It was no business of his that her father had forced her to write against her will. He had only to do with the fact that she had written, not once, but often. And though her letters were purposely made the deadest, the most soulless, the coldest, the most uninteresting things in the world; still they were letters; and he was a young man while she was a girl.

"I said just now that I was not the kind of girl to have young men friends; and I am still less the kind to keep up a correspondence with one of my own accord," said Stella, a little less icily than before.

He recognized the partial thaw in her voice.

"But you made an exception in my favour; and will again?' he asked eagerly.

She looked up into his face then down on to the sand.

"No," she said; "I told papa before I left home that I would not write to you any more."

"I will try to change that negative into an affirmative. Some day it will come!" said Valentine confidently, hoping all things and believing as much as he hoped because her voice was softer and her eyes looked down in pity, not up in defiance. All the hopes of love are built out of these small splinters. Not the finest Roman mosaic is composed of such minute pieces; not the ultimate atom itself is more microscopic, more intangible, than the shadowy nothings which go to create that gigantic and omnipotent Love who rules the world and makes of man the equal of the gods or the sport of the demons!

"No, do not try, you cannot change it," said Stella, just as Augusta and her boy came to them, laden with slimy treasures and strong smelling "finds" of all sorts and descriptions.

"When did you come?" cried the widow in her genial way, glancing with a half-amused, half-anxious air to Stella as if to see how she bore herself and what effect the sudden advent of her father's Admirable Crichton had had on her.

"Just now," said Valentine.

"It is quite a surprise," said Augusta. "Why did you not give us notice?"

"I did," returned Valentine, heroically conquering his pride and swallowing his mortification. "If Miss Branscombe had done me the honour of reading my letter she would have found that I intended to be here by the ten-forty train this morning!"

"Oh, that naughty, lazy girl!" cried Augusta pleasantly. "People should always read their letters as soon as they arrive. I believe it was Lord Palmerston who said all letters answered themselves if left long enough; but that is not my way."

"I wish you would make your way your friend's," said Valentine, with a rueful look to where Stella was strolling away among the rocks with the boy.

The little fellow could never have enough of anemones and long green slimy ribbons, and thought the dirt and drip of the seaside the most enjoyable part of the business.

"And I wish," added Val significantly, "that you would stand my friend, Mrs. Latrobe."

"I do; I am your friend," answered Augusta also significantly. "I want to see Stella well married. She would be so much happier and better in every way than she is now, with only that dreadful father of hers to be her companion! But, frankly, for all her soft manners and sweet-tempered acquiescence in little things, she is exceedingly difficult to influence in graver matters."

"Time works wonders; and constant dropping wears away even granite. And she is not granite!" laughed Valentine, with a sudden flush of confidence.

"But sometimes time only confirms," said the widow, in her character of Justice, holding the balance even, and weighing chances as well as merits.

The tide had turned and was now coming in. Stella and the boy had gone far away to the very border of the waves. It was such fun to run forward a few steps, as if to defy that incoming crest, and then to scamper back as fast as those small feet could run to prevent being overtaken by the water! And as Stella was essentially good-natured and easy to live with, she let the child enjoy himself in his own way, glad for her own part to be rid of poor Valentine Cowley and his less than welcome attentions.

As they were standing on the firm yellow sand, playing with the incoming tide, they were being surrounded in that strange insidious way which characterizes certain sea-coasts. Silently and rapidly they were being cut off from the mainland, and soon were standing on a little island which every moment became smaller, while every moment the barrier of intervening waters became wider and deeper. There was as yet no kind of danger to life. It was just an unpleasant little adventure which carried with it wet feet and a pair of hopelessly ruined boots. But when Val and Augusta made out the situation of which Stella, for want of looking behind her, was entirely ignorant, they rushed over the sands at full speed,—Augusta calling to her boy and Val shouting to Stella.

"Stay where you are, Mrs. Latrobe," then said Valentine. "I will get them through. There is no danger—don't alarm yourself."

Stella turned at their voices, to find herself with the boy on a mere islet of sand with the waters all round her, and Valentine Cowley dashing through, over his ankles, even now, while the tide poured in and spread onward almost as swiftly as a fleet horse could gallop.

"Don't move till I come to you!" said Valentine, grateful to Providence for the chance.

How well he looked as he came on in the sunshine, splashing through the rapidly rising water! It was the kind of action which becomes a man and puts him in good humour with himself, conscious as he is that he shows well and makes a large display at a little cost. Val knew that he looked handsome and brave and strong and helpful as he went striding through the rising waters to where the girl whom he loved, and the child of whom she had undertaken the care, were standing. He knew that he showed well, and that he was laying the foundations for future gratitude. He had never been so finely posed as now; and he intended to make the best of the situation.

"I am so sorry," said Stella in a humiliated voice, feeling how the tables were turned, not in her favour. "I don't know how I came to be so stupid and neglectful."

"You did not look round," said Valentine with what he meant to be a soothing concession to her wounded pride. "Now you must let me carry you through. There is no real danger at this moment, but there will be if you are not quick.

Here, you young powder-monkey, do you hold fast up aloft," he continued, with a reminiscence of the Pennefather manner in his voice and action, as he snatched up the boy and set him astride on his shoulders. Then, without losing time in compliment or argument, choosing not to hear Stella's declaration that she would walk through on her own feet and despise the wetting that would follow, he took her bodily in his strong young arms; and in this way carried both her and the child in safety through the waters. It was all done easily and quickly; for the young fellow was muscular and well-trained in athletics; and it had the air if not the reality of saving life at his own risk—an air of which, as has been said, he intended to make the most for future use. If he had not been in love and repulsed, he would have been the first to laugh at the whole matter as not worth thanks of any kind. As things were he was not sorry to be able to pose for a hero; albeit the dangers encountered had been no more formidable than if a white mouse had set its teeth at him. Tendrils, weak and soft, help to support the heavily-laden vine; and Val's love could not afford to despise the most insignificant little aid.

So they walked back to the inn, the young man dripping from his knees downwards and carrying his handsome head like a hero—Augusta his friend and brother for life, seeing that he had preserved her little boy from what might have been indeed dangerous to him—Stella, ashamed and annoyed with herself, her heart set against gratitude and her conscience pulling her towards thankfulness, in a most uncomfortable and distracted state of mind altogether, and with that feeling of slipping down the incline, so terrible to her, yet which Augusta had found anything but terrible not so long ago. Still, as she was the only unhappy one of the little group, the greatest happiness of the greatest number carried the day.

As they went, Valentine Cowley, too content with life as it was and too certain of himself and hopeful of results to make love in any overt way—rather letting fate and fortune make love for him—turned to Augusta, and not thinking he was touching tender places said in a light and airy way:

"Who do you think came in the same train with me from Grange this morning? Mr. Kemp!—with the prettiest woman you can imagine—one of those fragile, slender, delicate creatures who look made up of clouds and moonbeams, with a pair of soft, brown eyes that went half over her face and the

sweetest voice I ever heard. One of the sweetest," he added, correcting himself; for her melodious voice was one of Stella's "points." "He seemed awfully wrapped up in her, I must say," Val continued with the same blundering ignorance of depths. "And I don't wonder at it; she was so awfully pretty and awfully good style."

"Indeed!" said Augusta, with a hard little laugh and her fair face suddenly aflame. "All Highwood seems to have gathered to St. Ann's."

"By Jove, talk of the—— Here he is!" cried Valentine, as Sandro Kemp, carrying a shawl, a camp-stool, a white umbrella, an olive-wood folding-footstool, an artist's portfolio, and bearing on his arm a tall, graceful, diaphanous-looking woman, came out of the hotel door just as Augusta and the others drew up, and thus met the little party face to face.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

COUSIN ETHEL.

SANDRO'S first impulse was to make a movement of glad surprise towards that fair, false, morally perjured woman—his first mental process was a swift suppression of all the pain and wrath which had possessed him since those cruel words of undeserved insult, that heartless abandonment of their pleasant friendship. His next was a return to his now normal attitude of wounded pride and outraged affection, and that bitter assumption of indifference by which we attempt to master our pain, and by which instead of concealing it we show it.

As coldly as if this were nothing but a chance meeting between two mere acquaintances, Sandro Kemp lifted his soft felt hat to Augusta and her party. He would have passed on with the pretty woman and all her belongings on his arm, had not Tony rushed at him, after the manner of a child who knows nothing of the meaning of things, and who would not hesitate to make mud-pies out of Mecca clay, nor to take cockshies at sacred symbols.

"Oh, Mr. Kemp, where have you been away to?" he said, jumping about him like a little dog. "I have been ill; and grandmamma gave me some jelly one night in a spoon; and Shah killed a robin redbreast in the snow; and the river was

frozen—that bit where you made mamma cry," he added with a suddenly serious face.

Doubt as to the propriety of his own joy at this unexpected meeting with one who had dealt so evilly by mamma came visibly into his clear eyes, his drawn mouth; but his mother smiled at him and then at their friend in an amiable and inane way; and her smile reassured the child.

"Why, Tony, do you remember me, little man?" said Sandro, flushing with pleasure.

He looked from the child to the mother—from the eloquent little face, bright and beaming, to that vague mask of inane amiability.

"It would have been odd if he had forgotten you," said Augusta, with perfect tranquillity of voice and manner and a very audacity of forgetfulness, such as the French would have characterized as sublime.

But then this was essentially Augusta's way. When she chose she could make herself like a smooth palimpsest newly prepared for fresh inscriptions and with all the old lettering seemingly obliterated for ever. To see and hear her at these times no one could believe that anything had ever gone before—that the history of a life lay hidden beneath the waxen surface, the blank serenity, of the moment. As now; no one could have imagined by her manner that a thought had ever connected her future with Sandro Kemp—that a tear had ever come into her eyes because of the pain of renunciation—that the strong wing of passion had ever swept over her as she stood midway, halting for a moment, between duty and inclination—that the darkness of despair had ever fallen about her like a cloud because of the cruelty of fate which denied what she desired. She met him as if they had parted yesterday, and as if nothing had ever been between them more than a dance, a flower, a merry jest, a careless laugh. Not the keenest onlooker could discern the faintest shadow of feeling in her face, of embarrassment in her manner. Not even Stella, who knew something, could divine more; while Sandro himself felt bewildered, and as if he had somehow lost his way. He was like a man who, wandering among pathless crags and over arid wastes, suddenly finds himself at home, brought thither, as it seems to him, by some act of enchantment as inexplicable as delightful. Had he been a coward? or what did it all mean? Was she playing with him now? or had she been compelled to wound him then?

"You have been away such a long time, Mr. Kemp, it is quite delightful to see you again!" then said Stella, as her contribution to the odd if pleasant confusion of the moment.

Her voice and manner were kind to exaggeration; for she wanted not only to stand as shield-bearer to Augusta, but to administer that kind of cold douche to poor Valentine which consists in showing extreme warmth to one who is confessedly indifferent, in contrast to the chill reserve just shown another who is confessedly making efforts to win favour. It is the "high light" by which the whole picture takes its tone and receives its key.

Sandro turned to her with a smile. Here at least was no deception. Stella Branscombe had no reason to mislead him. What she said was all sincere, true, hearty; and her kindness might be accepted as confidingly as it was offered generously. It was the common judgment of the world such as it is—that judgment which each man believes so infallible when he forms it!

The tall, graceful, diaphanous kind of woman, who as Valentine had said, seemed to be made up of clouds and moonbeams, opened her big eyes and looked at Stella with frank surprise. How odd this flattering manner from a girl to a gentleman! she thought. In her own life she was accustomed to have men about her as her slaves, not to make herself their incense-bearer! But here was a girl who said to an unmarried man how delightful it was to see him again, and how long it was since they had met, in a voice which seemed equivalent to a caress—which was tantamount to flinging herself at his head! What wretched style! What miserable manners! That elder woman was a little better. There was none of this milkmaid exuberance about her; but really if this girl intended to go on as she had begun, this sojourn at St. Ann's, so necessary for health and strength, would be immensely unpleasant.

While Sandro's companion had been thinking all this in her own mind, Augusta had been taking mental stock of her. Who was she, this tall, eminently graceful and poetic-looking person? She was very beautiful; but it was a pity that she made up so much. She was not quite in her first youth, but beneath her veil, thanks to powder and paint, to antimony round her eyes and to artful touches everywhere, she seemed to have the colouring of sixteen; and her figure, of that

slender and sinuous kind which retains its early forms far into the other half of maturity, helped the general delusion. She was dressed in the extreme of the prevailing fashion. Her gown was as if moulded on her like a second skin, and her skirts were tied back with so much vigour that she could only walk by plaiting her feet one before the other. Her hat was a marvel of picturesque assimilation; and beneath the feathers, which seemed almost part of her head-gear as nature had made it, her gold-coloured hair shone in the sun like a much-frizzed nimbus—owing the chief part of its glory to auricomous fluid and soda washes. Her small feet were shod in coquettish boots mounted on narrow heels like miniature stilts; her six-buttoned gloves were of the palest grey; and the bracelets, multitudinous bangles, broad dog-collar, earrings and brooch, with which she was in a sense armour-plated, were of the finest kind of Indian jewellery. Her face was delicately modelled; her style went to simulate more fragility of health than was true; and she had the air of one accustomed to command, accustomed to be ministered to, and, beyond all things, used to the homage and admiration of men. And again Augusta wondered how Sandro Kemp, of all men, had come into toils like these, and how he—the lover par excellence of truth and simplicity—should be standing there with this graceful piece of elegant make-up leaning as it seemed to her triumphantly on his arm.

Suddenly the artist seemed to remember his companion and their joint position.

"Ethel," he said to her very courteously; "let me introduce you to Mrs. Latrobe and Miss Branscombe." To Augusta he said, as if with emphasis: "My cousin, Mrs. White." Then he looked at Stella. "Mrs. White has just come from India," he said smiling. "I believe she knows some friends of ours out there—Mr. Cyril Ponsonby."

It was now Stella's turn to feel the ground unsteady beneath her tread. Here before her stood the cause of some, if not of all, her sufferings—that Mrs. White to whom the Pennefathers had said her own true Love had turned the once sacred current of his affections! This woman, painted, artificial, made-up and dangerous—the cause for which she, Stella, had been banished so effectually from his life—was now looking into her face, bowing, smiling, speaking as any other might have done!

"I have heard of Miss Branscombe," said Mrs. White in a

sweet flute-like voice, with a pretty little catch that just escaped being a lisp.

Stella made a slight movement with her head. Had her life depended on it she could not have spoken.

"I used to see a good deal of Mr. Ponsonby," Mrs. White went on to say in her soft way. "We got to be quite friends. He is such a pleasant person; and my husband liked him so much."

"We heard of your kindness to him," said Augusta, coming to Stella's rescue, as just now Stella had come to hers by emphasizing her greeting to Sandro Kemp.

"Oh! I cannot speak about kindness," said Mrs. White with a tender kind of smile. "In India we are all kind to each other. We are like one family, you know, and have less stiffness than you in this cold England of yours."

She was an Englishwoman herself, but part of the furniture of her personality was the affectation of foreign ways and corresponding strangeness to all belonging to the old home. She even spoke with a certain broken-backed little accent, as if her native tongue had been learned abroad—making her vowels very open, pronouncing her small words with punctilious breadth, and giving each syllable with commendable distinctness.

"He is a very nice fellow," said Augusta with vague amiability; and Ethel White, looking at Stella, smiled again and said: "Very," as the echo.

All this time Valentine had been standing essentially shut out from the rest. He had not been introduced to the graceful woman of whose advent he had been the herald; and for the moment he was effaced. Wet from the knees downward and set aside, he was conscious of appearing ridiculous for the one part, and of playing a very humiliating chord on the second fiddle for the other. He was sore at heart, wounded in his pride, and furious against that vague mischance, that shadowy foe, called Fate. Was there ever such an unlucky coincidence!—just when he had founded such an undeniable claim to Stella's gratitude, and put their relations on so much better a footing—built up such a pleasant little temple where Love was at once the architect and the enclosed god—to have everything blown about his ears by this inopportune meeting!

He stood there, his blood boiling as the name of Cyril Ponsonby was bandied about from one to the other. He saw

how pale Stella had become when the name of her reported rival had been uttered, and how her eyes had suddenly filled with memories of her old Love as patently shown as if pictures had been painted on the dilated pupils—as if words had been printed on the darkened iris. It was too hard a trial for his philosophy to bear with equanimity. He was not disposed at any time to bear trials with equanimity, more especially those which touched his young man's pride; and now the fever of his wrath burnt like fire in his veins, and expressed itself on his face and bearing as plainly as those memories of Cyril had written themselves in Stella's eyes.

But he was not going to give up his hope, to abandon the field. He would wrestle with the shadowy rival, this haunting memory, as Jacob wrestled with the angel. And perhaps he would overthrow him. The Kingdom of Heaven is won by much seeking; and Val was pertinacious when he had made up his mind and until that mind changed of itself, as it was apt to do. The very difficulties in his way made the struggle more enthralling and the hope of attainment all the sweeter; and—"les absents ont toujours tort." He was present, and Cyril was hundreds of miles away. He could perform gallant actions which stood out firm and solid as triumphant facts, while his rival lived only in the misty atmosphere of memory. On the whole his place might have been more untenable than it was; and he thought he saw daylight.

Tired of being thus effaced, thinking that Sandro had behaved with impertinent neglect in not introducing him to his cousin and feeling very uncomfortable about those well-shaped lower limbs of his, Valentine turned to Augusta with his off-hand, easy air.

"I think I will go in now, Mrs. Latrobe," he said. "I am rather dilapidated, and must put myself into dry clothes."

A deep colour came into his fair, handsome face, as he looked down on his stained and dripping garments, not sorry to recall to Stella's mind his heroic deed of half an hour ago, and thinking it hard to have got wet, spoiled his get-up, and then to be shunted as he had been.

"Yes, do. Indeed you should have gone before," said Augusta eagerly. "What a thoughtless thing to do, standing there so wet as you are! We shall have you down with rheumatic fever next."

"Do go in and change, Mr. Cowley," said Stella, humanity

overcoming repugnance. "We should not have let you stand here in this state."

Valentine looked radiant as Stella spoke. It was a little recompense that she should publicly show so much interest in him—a little balm to his wounded pride that she should give him tender counsel before Cyril Ponsonby's intimate friend—and his face brightened as if the sun had passed over it.

That sudden brightness gave a tolerably correct map of the country to pretty Mrs. White. In all that related to love affairs and the whole art and mystery of flirtation, she had the vision of a hawk behind those large lustrous eyes of hers. Mrs. Morshead herself was not more an adept in the science of building up an entire temple out of one brick, of constructing a full-fledged creature out of one bone, than was Ethel White, Sandro's cousin from India. Here before her was a brick—at her feet a bone; and she made the most of both.

"Where shall you be in half an hour's time, Mrs. Latrobe?" then asked Valentine.

"At home; in the prosaic act of dining," said Augusta with a smile. "We have to dine early on account of the boy; and really tea with shrimps and marmalade is not so bad. And you?"

"I shall join you when you have finished dinner, if you will allow me," said Valentine, purposely not looking at Stella.

Stella did look at Augusta, and her eyes prayed her to say "No." But Augusta had her own idea of things; and when she had an idea she generally kept to it pretty closely. She liked Valentine Cowley; and she too believed in the value of pertinacity, the force of presence, and the disintegrating influence of absence.

"Yes, do come," she said genially. "It is such a delightful day, we might make a little excursion this afternoon. It would be pleasant if you came with us."

"Most happy. That will do well," said Valentine. "At what time?"

"Three," said Augusta. "So now go in and get rid of your wet clothes."

Ethel White looked at Sandro.

"It would be very nice for us to go somewhere too this afternoon," she said in her pretty graceful way, showing an evident desire to coalesce with Augusta and her party. "Do you think we could, cousin Sandro?"

"Certainly; nothing is easier if you would like it," he answered.

"Shall we join in one party?" then said Ethel, addressing Augusta as easily and amicably as if they had been friends for a generation.

Perhaps this was part of that frank hospitality, that œcumenical friendliness, for which Anglo-Indians are famous. Certainly the proposal seemed to come quite naturally, without design, premeditation or hidden meaning of any kind. It would be pleasanter to go in a body than in two scattered and meagre detachments; and, being pleasant, Sandro's cousin said so, and offered that sudden coalescence as the most natural thing in the world. The faint pink tinge for which she was famous came into the widow's fair face. She put on her waxen mask, smiled with inane amiability and looked perseveringly at Stella.

"It will be very pleasant," she said with an affected little drawl. "What do you say, Stella?"

"Yes; it will be very pleasant," echoed Stella, divided between her instinctive shrinking from Mrs. White, Cyril's favourite friend, and her desire to be separated by "people" from Valentine Cowley.

And Valentine himself, though he detested the proposition, could scarcely negative the decision of the others.

Sandro Kemp did not speak. He simply turned his grave, kind eyes on Augusta, a little wonder, a little speculation and more sorrow, more inquiry in them than he himself knew of. But the engagement held good; and at three the break came round and they all went off together.

They had a charming drive. The country was beautiful; the old castle which they went to see was interesting; the day was perfect; and no accident of any kind happened to mar the enjoyment which each was supposed to feel. They all kept very close together; and every one but Val and Tony seemed determined to resist all attempts at separation from the main body, and to resolutely decline that dangerous "solitude à deux" which more than one had reason to fear and from which no one had great cause to hope. Sandro was naturally his cousin's bodyguard; and to be Ethel White's bodyguard was no sinecure and left but little margin of freedom for aught else. Stella clung to Augusta as if her very life depended on keeping tight hold of that firm round arm. She was not to be tempted away by all Val's invita-

tions to mount this bit of broken wall for the sake of the view—to come with him to that angle of the ruined court for the sake of architectural effects. She clung to Augusta like a child; and like a child Augusta took care of her. For her own part, the fair widow talked amiably to Ethel White; and Sandro kept silence. The Pennefathers would have called him as dull as old boots, but Augusta did not. For once or twice their eyes met; and when they did, it was to her as if his had audibly asked her a question, to which she took care to make no reply. So the afternoon passed and with the evening they all came home. But nothing had been done to advance the various dramas holding the stage save the introduction into the circle of Ethel White, Cyril's chosen friend in India and Sandro Kemp's favourite cousin, and the easy manner in which she had established herself as an old friend among them all.

CHAPTER XL.

THE CRIMSON BARS OF EVENING.

To a married woman living in India, a train of admirers comes as naturally as a train of servants. Why should she not be adored? It does the dear boys good to come about her bungalow like so many tame rabbits; and it keeps them straight to have a friend like herself, maternal and admonitory if she be their junior and exceptionally pretty—their frank playfellow and younger sister if older than they and only comely or maybe commonplace. And if it does them good it does her no harm, and it makes her husband a little more on the alert, a little more careful to keep what he has got, than English husbands are in general. Without question, a train of adorers is a very pleasant addition to the social appanage of a young wife in India; and to do her justice she seldom stints herself in the strength of her following.

But what comes so naturally to her and the dear boys who crowd round her in the compound and run in and out her bungalow like so many tame rabbits on the hunt for parsley, is a state of things quite foreign to the life at home. It takes a certain education before a young Englishman of ordinarily healthy morality and ordinarily honourable training can bring himself to make love to a married woman, whether her husband be his friend or no. And it soon

became evident to Ethel White that no happy hunting-grounds were open to her here, and that she must be content to feel herself distanced by Stella, and shut out all round. This handsome young fellow, this Valentine Cowley, did not attempt to take up the glove thrown down by her expressive eyes. Neither during that drive, nor after it, did he advance one step towards that mental condition which the Doves were wont to localize under the name of "Spooney Green." He had eyes only for Stella, and the attentions which he paid to her, Ethel White, were of the coldest and most perfunctory kind. How different from the devotion she was accustomed to receive in that much-abused land of punkahs and rupees! There she was supreme; here she was nobody—distanced by a little country girl without style or furniture, and who had already a lien on another!

Really this sojourn at St. Ann's threatened to be horribly slow. Ethel wished now that she had remained with her husband's stiff old aunt, instead of breaking loose after a week's stay and one fit of hysterics. She would not have been duller there than it was evident she would be here; and she would have pleased her husband and won golden opinions from his very stupid family—which was always something gained. Now, subordinate to Stella Branscombe with this handsome Mr. Cowley; knowing that there had been an affair between her and Cyril Ponsonby on whom she had expended a large amount of useless powder and shot; and her cousin Sandro somewhat odd in his manner to this Mrs. Latrobe—who yet was nice enough in her own way—it all was really too horrid; and no wonder she did not like it.

Her secret dissatisfaction however, showed itself only in increased friendship to the women and more and more delightfulness of gracious queenhood to the men—in taking her place among them all, as if born into it and coming now frankly into her inheritance—and in practically assuming the headship of everything and making every one subservient to her will, while professing only sweet submission to the vote of the majority. It was only her wretched health, her stupid weakness which was in the way at times. She was so sorry; but she could not help it, could she? And how she envied the great strong robustness of both Mrs. Latrobe and Miss Branscombe! If only she could be as strong!

Her manner all through was perfect. Indeed, she was famous for her manner throughout the Presidency. She had

never yet met the man—save Cyril Ponsonby—whom she did not make her slave;—and even Cyril was in some sense her slave, though not exactly after the pattern that she had designed. And she had never met the woman whom she had failed to secure as an active friend or an innocuous neutral. She was irresistible; and she knew it; the finest flower of the finest lily-root of woman grown by this nineteenth-century civilization. Besides all this grace and dignity combined, she was extremely strict in her views on morality and social ethics; unimpeachable on the score of orthodoxy and ritual; and her naïve admiration for her husband was only equalled by the philosophy with which she bore their separations—which were frequent. She spoke very much against women who laced tight, flirted in public, were suspected of rouge and did not live happily with their husbands. Hence, she was eminently safe both as a maternal friend for young men and as a sisterly companion for girls.

The first day of the cousins' arrival passed without other incident than this coalescence of forces in the drive—this odd clinging together like so many swarming bees, when at the castle. Neither Augusta nor Stella "showed" in the later evening; and Valentine mooned among the rocks alone and wondered what his best plan really was—whether he should make Stella a plain, straightforward offer as things stood, or work away a little longer at that sapping and mining which he fondly hoped would prove successful in the end. When Ethel and Sandro went out for that evening stroll on the sands which comes in as part of the seaside duties, they saw the young fellow standing against the sunset sky, looking very lonely, very handsome, very much as if he would be the better for a nice little talk with a pretty woman who understood the art of judicious stirring up. But he did not accept the chance. With one quick look to make sure that Stella was nowhere pinned to the diaphanous woman's graceful skirts, he lifted his hat and let the cousins pass on, while he continued to stare at the sands and the sky in alternate fluctuations of imbecile despair and irrational anger. He was very much disappointed and very much disgusted; and he did not care a straw for the challenge flung down by the big eyes of this diaphanous-looking woman. He cared only for Stella Branscombe—only for her! And, wanting her, neither youth nor health, neither the present nor the future counted.

"What a rude young man that Valentine Cowley is!" said Ethel pettishly, breaking into the midst of her cousin Sandro's artistic raptures about the sunset.

"Val Cowley? Oh, he is well enough!" said Sandro kindly.

"Cousin Sandro, you are a great goose," said Ethel with charming insolence. "You never did understand anything, except your paint-box; and you never will. You are just a child."

"I am sorry, dear," he began penitently.

"What is the use of being sorry?" she interrupted crossly. "That does not make you any wiser. What is the good for instance of all this rubbish about the sunset, when I am cold and tired? All that you say is great nonsense. This vile English climate of yours is horrid. And as for your stupid skies and things, they are nothing compared to ours. I have seen far finer sunsets than this; and it makes my eyes ache to look at it. Let us go in. I want to go to bed."

"I am sorry you are tired, dear," said Sandro again very kindly. "I am afraid I have made you do too much."

"I am so delicate," said Ethel with a sigh. "I am so sensitive to climate and fatigue and everything of that kind. I am not like these great English milkmaids of yours—this Augusta Latrobe and Stella Branscombe. They look to me like grenadiers in petticoats—great, strong, coarse things! I am a mimosa; and they are great, square, tough-skinned oaks!"

"Oh!" said Sandro a little disconcerted. "But I am very sorry you are tired, Ethel. Perhaps I have made you do too much. I must take more care of you another time."

"Oh, *you* cannot take care of any one!" said Ethel rudely. "You are nothing but a stupid moony old artist. So good night, and try and get a little more sense if you can. It would not be to your disadvantage."

Saying which, she raised her big eyes to Sandro with a look that was substantially a caress, while she openly yawned in his face.

For all that, she had an irresistible manner, and was famous for her power of fascinating and conciliating women—even the women whom she dispossessed.

"How very glad I was to see Mr. Kemp again!" said Stella the next morning. "Were you glad too, Augusta?" she asked earnestly.

"Was I?" returned Augusta, with a heightened colour and a forced laugh, "That is rather what lawyers call a leading question, Stella mia. Yes and no. For some things I was very glad; for others I do not know what to say!"

"But which is most—your pleasure or your doubt?" the girl asked again.

"Come! come! remonstrated Augusta, still laughing in the same forced manner as before; "who made you my inquisitor, young lady? Why should I confess to you?"

"Because I love you, and am your friend," said Stella. "And do not laugh, Augusta; I am so much in earnest!"

"Well, I will be in earnest, too," said Augusta, suddenly becoming serious. "I am more glad than sorry. I shall be much more glad if——"

She stopped, looking out of the window in a hesitating, half-bashful way.

"If what, Augusta?"

"If I find that he has forgiven me a terrible wrong which I was forced to do him some time since, and that he likes me as much as he used to do;" said Augusta, making a little movement with her hands as if she had flung down something on the table.

"Then you do really love him! I never felt quite sure whether it was fancy or real love!" cried Stella, going up to her and kissing her with that odd impulse of sympathy which one woman feels for the love affairs of another.

"I like him as much as I did—as much, perhaps, as I could like any one," said that disappointing Augusta, with a return to her old cautious and more natural attitude.

"Well enough to marry him?" asked Stella.

"Shall I wait till he asks me before I answer that question?" answered Augusta coldly; and the girl shrank back, feeling snubbed and rebuked.

"If ever I marry again," Augusta went on to say quietly; "it will be to a man able to support me well and to assure my boy's future. Else, be assured, little girl, I never shall!"

"What an extraordinary woman you are!" said Stella, almost as if in soliloquy. "You are unlike any one I ever saw before."

"How? and why?" asked the widow.

"Such a strange mixture of reserve and frankness—of high principle and such dreadful worldliness!" answered Stella.

"Because I have common sense, and act upon it. What

kind of mother should I be if I doomed my child to poverty and disinheritance that I might make a fool's paradise for myself with a poor man? It is both wiser and better philosophy to bear patiently all the troubles which beset me at home, when I can not do better for him by leaving them. If I could improve, or keep his position even with what it is now, I would marry—any one I cared for—if he asked me; but only on consideration that Tony's future was not compromised."

Augusta spoke as calmly as if she had been speaking of parallelograms and rhomboids rather than the living impulses of love, the emotional forces of a life.

"Still it is strange to hear you discuss it all so coolly," said Stella, far from being satisfied and as far from being convinced.

She knew what it was to sacrifice love for duty in her own life; but this kind of frigid calculation, this even balancing of accounts and relative values, was another matter altogether.

"If you did not want to hear the true truth, you should not have questioned me," said Augusta.

"I did want to hear the true truth," returned Stella.

The widow shook her head, half seriously, half playfully.

"I tell you what it is, Stella mia," she answered; "you are like all the rest; you want to hear only what pleases you and what suits your own ideas;—not things as they are, but things as they should be."

"If one loves any one one wants them to be perfect," said Stella, her grammar false, her sentiment true.

"And this confession of mine that I would not marry a poor man, even if I loved him, and that I would marry a rich one with only a moderate amount of affection, seems to you very imperfect, does it?" said Augusta.

"It seems too cold and calculating," repeated Stella.

"That is just what it is," Augusta exclaimed with a smile. "And I defend it on the ground that to be cold and calculating—that is, cool-headed and rational—is to be wise, when the contrary is foolish."

"It is not having much romance in one's life," said Stella.

"Certainly not; but then you know I pride myself on not being romantic," said Augusta with exasperating tranquillity. "And, Stella mia, the best thing that you could do would be to follow my advice in this, and marry where the conditions

were suitable, without bothering yourself too much about love. That would come, as I said before."

"Never!" answered Stella.

As she said this the door opened and the servant admitted Valentine Cowley. And when he had bidden them smilingly "Good morning," asked after the health of each as anxiously as if there had been cause for doubt, inquired, with almost paternal interest, where Tony was and how he did, and then disposed of his fine person on a chair, Stella got up from her place on the sofa and quietly left the room.

"I do believe that Miss Branscombe positively hates me!" said Val, stung to wrathful exaggeration as Stella disappeared through the doorway and left him to the widow.

"No, she is too gentle to hate any one, even if she had reason," said Augusta quietly. "And she has no reason, that I know of, even to dislike, still less to hate, you."

"She does, reason or not. And I am sure I do not know what I have ever done to make her dislike me so much," said Val still hotly.

Augusta looked up. Her calm face betrayed the faintest little inclination to smile, and in her quiet eyes was something that looked very much like a mischievous little twinkle.

"Don't you think you follow her up a little too openly?" she said, with commendable demureness. "I think she gets a little frightened, and as if she did not know what was coming next. She is not a girl who cares for the admiration of men; and I think if I were you I would be more reserved and not show my hand quite so openly."

"I cannot help it!" said Valentine. "I do admire her, Mrs. Latrobe, more than I have admired any girl in my life. She is Supreme; my highest idea of a woman. Were I an artist I would paint Stella Branscombe as Dante's Beatrice."

"You mean to say that you are desperately in love with her," said Augusta quietly.

"Perhaps I am," he answered with a deep blush, making a feint to be uncertain.

"You know you are," said Augusta. "We all know it—Stella too, if she would but own it."

"Then, if she does, she treats me cruelly," he said in much agitation.

"Why? Would you have her give you false hopes?" asked the widow.

"Why should they be false?" pleaded Val.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Who can control these things?" she said. "If Stella saw with my eyes matters would be very different."

"Then you are still my friend!" he cried in a voice of triumph.

He could not have used a more jocund tone had she promised him an earldom and given him a fortune.

"Undoubtedly," she said in her quiet way. "I have always told you so. I despise Mr. Branscombe so much that I would give worlds to see Stella freed from him. She is unhappy as it is at home—she would be more unhappy still if she knew all!"

"Ah, I see," said Val, holding up his head. "I am only a pis-aller even to you! You would have her take me to escape from her father;—not because she loved me—not because I love her and am worthy of her love."

"My dear Mr. Cowley," said the widow smiling; "I am one of those cold-blooded creatures who think that love is only one of the ingredients in marriage. We want so much else! I would not counsel what even I should call a good marriage where there was decided dislike; but provided there is harmony of taste, mutual respect and no pronounced aversion, I think a well-arranged marriage, without any great amount of love, has as much chance of turning out happily as one with. You know as well as I that Stella was engaged to Cyril Ponsonby; and you can see as well as I that she has not quite got over her disappointment even yet. I should be very glad if you could make her forget him, as there seems no chance of that affair coming on again; but——"

"But you would prefer Mr. Ponsonby?" interrupted Val with sarcastic fury.

"Of course I should!" she answered. "Failing him——"

"You would back me?" was his second interruption, as sarcastic and furious as the former.

"Certainly. You are a very nice fellow; you love her; you have enough now, and will have a splendid position when your father dies. I think it would be a charming marriage," said Augusta with maddening coolness.

"You flatter me!" said Val, the "risus sardonicus" contorting his face.

"Oh! I have always been your advocate since the marriage with Cyril Ponsonby was broken off," said Augusta simply.

And here the conversation ended abruptly; for Sandro

Kemp and Ethel White came in to make one of those formal visits in use among people who, living in the same place and doing the same things at the same hours, see each other two or three times a day but feel bound all the same to pay formal visits to each other's rooms, as if they lived miles apart and met only by chance once a month in general society.

The time at St. Ann's passed pleasantly enough for all concerned if we except Stella, whose pleasure was of a more intermittent kind than the others found theirs to be. The facilities of meeting were many and liberally utilized, and the five friends were, in a manner, inseparable. Still they clung together like five roses in a bunch, and private interviews between any two were of the things which were not. Mrs. White was always the centre, and the rest hung about her as bees round their queen. She had taken a great fancy to Stella, whom she treated as a younger sister needing careful chaperonage—and having it; Val was to her as a younger brother, she said—"just what Cyril Ponsonby used to be to me!" she used to add in her sweet, languid way—fetching, carrying, meandering about her all day long in concert with cousin Sandro; and Augusta Latrobe was her confidante and never let out of sight. Thus it came about that no private interviews were possible where Ethel White was queen, and Sandro and Augusta looked at each other across the space that divided them—looked and longed and nothing more!

The evening promised to give one of those absolutely perfect sunsets which sometimes at the seaside make a life an acted canto of poetry and the earth a very paradise of beauty. The wide dome was like one large opal, marked here and there with narrow crimson bars where the light airless clouds caught the redness of the sinking sun; but save these forestanding bars the whole dome was of resplendent purity, as bright and tender in its passage from the gold of the west to the purple of the east, as if this strong North Sea were the lagoons of Venice or the waters of the Mediterranean. All the visitors at St. Ann's had turned out on to the sands to watch the final decline of the sun; and among the rest were the five friends:—Ethel dressed as if for a foreign opera-house where she might wear her bonnet, and with the paint and powder well concealed beneath her tightly-drawn white tulle veil. Naturally they all met on the sands; and as naturally when they had met they did not separate.

Ethel, giving cousin Sandro her folding-seat, her olive-wood

footstool and her umbrella, asked Val to carry her shawl. She then took Stella's arm as her aid; thus placing herself between the girl and the man who loved her. Augusta was on Stella's other side; Sandro was walking in line, but at a little distance from them all. Seeing Tony doing something reprehensible with the seaweed, Augusta detached herself from the group and went back to the child. Before she knew what she was about she found herself alone with Sandro Kemp—Tony, out of his scrape and free from slime, running on ahead. It was the first time since his arrival that the artist had been with the widow out of earshot of his cousin; and he felt his heart beat as if it would break itself to pieces against his ribs, as he walked by the side of the woman whom he loved and who had paid back that love with such undeserved contempt—such cruel wrong.

He looked at her as she walked by his side with her easy step, at once light and firm; her upright carriage, supple and yet so strong; her calm face, which seemed to him the face of a goddess—or was it only the face of a woman who knew her game and played it with judgment? The fixed smile, which he knew so well and which concealed so much, was on her lips, and her eyes had drawn over the soul, which else would have shone through them, that mask of calm candour, of indifference that was almost hardness, which with her implied an effort and betrayed a struggle. Both he shared. For he was doing his best to keep back that love which outraged pride should have destroyed for ever—which should have died when his self-respect had been assailed. And he could not! he could not!

"Tell me," he said abruptly, when the silence between them had become too eloquent, too oppressive; "why did you write that letter?"

"It was my mother's doing," said Augusta, looking straight before her.

"It nearly broke my heart," said Sandro, his voice faltering. "It made me doubt both Providence and humanity."

"I am sorry," said Augusta very softly.

"And your mother made you? It was not your own will? It did not come from your heart?"

He spoke in a low and agitated voice, to which the gentle murmur of the receding tide came as a symphony, lending it cadence and melody.

"How should it have come from my own heart?" she

answered. "What reason had I to write such a cruel note to you?"

"It was cruel! You knew that it was cruel?" He took her hand and laid it on his arm. "You knew how I must suffer!" he said again.

"I knew that it was indefensible," she answered.

"I wish I could read you!" said Sandro feverishly. "You have always been the one woman in the world to me—the one perfect woman; but you have always been my Sphinx, too—lovely and inscrutable!"

"Have I?" she said.

She turned to him, and her eyes put off their mask for one instant. It was only for an instant, but it was enough. He caught his breath, and felt as if he staggered as he walked. What was false and what was true?—and which of all those varying motives, those crossing feelings, was to be accepted?

"You know that I am now rich," he said, speaking in the same sudden way as before.

"Yes," she answered frankly.

"Was it only my poverty in days gone by that stood between us?"

She looked at her little son.

"Yes," she answered. "It was for his sake."

"And now when I am rich?"

The crimson bars were burning slowly into purple; the golden glories of the burnished west were fading, and the translucent beauty of the opal was passing into one universal space of blue. One by one the stars came out as the day sank deeper into the sleep of night. From vapoury cloud the moon was now becoming clear and silvery. The soft peace and rest of night were falling on the earth and the hot turmoil and hard struggle of the day were done.

"And now when I am rich?" he asked again.

"You have all the power you wanted," she answered softly.

"Power to win your love?"

"That was never wanting," she said. "I had to be prudent but——"

A vivid blush and two sudden tears completed her sentence.

"My Queen! My beloved! At last I have reached my goal and now see heaven open before me!" said Sandro. "Now that I have won you I forget all the rest. And, perhaps," he added with all his old generous magnanimity; "perhaps I love you better for the pain you gave me, because it shows how

great and good you are and how you can, when need be, sacrifice yourself to your duty."

"It wanted only that!" said Augusta with indescribable tenderness of voice and face. "Now you hold me for ever!"

Just then the party before them came back on their steps.

"Cousin Sandro," said Ethel languidly, "would you give me my pliant and footstool? And would you mind holding the umbrella over me? I am so tired and the wind is so cold!"

CHAPTER XLI.

THE WEAVING WEB.

"I AM so sorry, Augusta!"

"About what, Stella, penserosa?" laughed the widow.

For herself she did not look able to be very sorrowful about anything this morning. Never had her face been so sincerely bright; never had been so frankly laid aside that mask of suave amiability, that appearance of unemotional suavity, which it was so often her best policy to assume. Her laugh had the joyous cadence of a child's—laughing because she was glad, and glad she scarcely knew why; her happy eyes, softened by love, shone clear and bright as the stars of last night's sky; her fair face looked younger, rounder, fresher than ever; that pretty dimple in her cheek was deeper and her skin was as transparent as a rose-leaf. She had put back her age ten years at the least since those fiery crimson bars had burned themselves out in the evening sky, to be lost in the tender peace of the silver moonlight—since the moment when Sandro Kemp had made the dark things clear, and had knitted up the ravelled sleeve of doubt and despair into a garment of certainty and divine content.

All the burden of her days was laid aside. She stood now free and unopposed. For the first time in her life she was both safe and supremely happy. The man whom she loved loved her; he was rich, and she was to marry him. She was to escape from the grinding thraldom of her mother's house, yet keep her boy's future secure. The stars were on her side; fate had borrowed the golden wheel of fortune; and all her flowers had borne their fruits. She was happy; oh, how happy! And here was Stella looking into her face with a pucker of trouble on her own.

It seemed almost sacrilege to Augusta that any one should be dissatisfied to-day. Surely life was good and the earth divine for all!

"What is troubling you, dear?" she asked after a short pause, during which Stella had looked at her with a certain, scarce reproach so much as surprise, on her sensitive face for this unsympathetic brightness on her friend's.

"I have had a letter from papa," said Stella.

"Yes? and then? He does not want you at home just yet, does he?" asked the widow.

"No; but he tells me I am to ask Hortensia Lyon to come and stay with me," said Stella.

"And that afflicts your little ladyship?"

"I do not like it," said Stella gravely.

She wished that Augusta would be more serious this morning, when she herself was so much disturbed!

"You do not like Hortensia, you mean?" said the widow.

"Not much," answered Stella.

"Then why have her always, and always at Rose Hill?" asked Augusta.

"Papa likes her," answered Stella.

"Oh,'" said Augusta drily. After a short pause she added frankly, with a pleasant laugh to take off the sting; "What a goose you are, Stella mia!"

"Why?" asked Stella, smiling for sympathy, but again a little surprised, this time by the vagueness as well as the abruptness of the accusation.

"Because you never see a danger until you are in the midst of it," answered the widow. "You got surrounded by the tide the other day for want of looking about you. Val Cowley helped you off then; you had better let him help you now out of a worse mess."

"Mr. Cowley—how I wish you would not speak of him," said Stella petulantly. "I hate his very name!"

"Do I not tell you that you are a goose?" returned Augusta tranquilly. "You would do far better to like it the best of all names in the world, and to let him help you."

"Help me from what? What is the worse mess you hint at?" asked Stella with a little shiver of dread as at the passing of ghostly footsteps—something intangible, yet full of terror.

"If you do not see it I will not enlighten you—at least not to-day," said the widow significantly but lightly. "Only, let me say again, you are to blame, my dear, for not escaping

from the incoming tide while you can. Meantime, you have to write to Hortensia Lyon and beg her as a favour to come and interrupt our happiness. Ah! you see, even you, my straightforward Stella, have to be a little fox at times and work in ambush like others. Even you have to say one thing and mean another—as we all must on occasions!"

"First a goose and next a fox—what next?" said Stella forcing a laugh.

"And a duck always," returned that silly Augusta, looking at her with strange tenderness—silly and tender both, because she was so happy!

So the letter was written as Mr. Branscombe had desired, and Hortensia was besought to come to St. Ann's for a little change of air; it would do her so much good and give her affectionate friend Stella so much pleasure! And when this was done, and the letter posted beyond recall, Augusta had to spend some of her surplus strength and serenity in persuading her poor downhearted friend that it was the very best thing in the world which could have happened; and that they would be all the merrier, according to the old proverb, by the introduction among them of that one more, albeit the most notorious wet-blanket and puritanical kill-joy to be found in Highwood.

"We will put her and Mrs. White together," said Augusta, eaughing like a harebrained school-girl. "How they will hate lach other! They will be like two Kilkenny cats, or a couple of Sir John Lubbock's stranger ants. There will be nothing left of either in a short time."

But Stella was moody and a little cross, and between Val Cowley and Evangeline saw nothing to laugh at in the matter.

"Hortensia will never consent to go with Mrs. White," she answered, wilfully making the worst of things. "She will fasten herself on me from morning to night. I know her so well! And of course, as I am her special friend and have had to ask her, I shall be forced to look after her. And then I shall see nothing of you, Augusta!"

She forgot that, if this view of Hortensia's advent and its results were true, she would be protected from Val Cowley's unwelcome attentions, even if cut off from her present close communion with Augusta. She was too much disturbed to remember anything by way of mitigation.

"Oh yes, you will! You will see as much of me as you do now—as much of me as you like," answered the widow

cheerily. "Courage! It may not turn out so badly after all. You will always have me as your background, of course; and if Mrs. White is of no good, your poor despised Val Cowley will come in useful as a paratonnerre," she added with good-humoured maliciousness.

Nothing could be more delightful than Augusta's manner and nothing could be less natural. It was the truth, but not the whole truth—nothing feigned, but something concealed.

Stella's colour came suddenly into her face, and as suddenly the egoistical trouble which had clouded it left it free, expansive, loving, as it was by the royal gift of nature. She fixed her eyes with an eager kind of light on her friend.

"Only these?" she asked smiling and with meanig . "Mrs. White, Mr. Cowley, yourself—no one else that I may count on for championship?"

"And Tony, who is devoted to you. You are the boy's first love, Stella. Little scamp! he has begun early!" said Tony's mother quite pleasantly, not looking at her friend and not rising to her fly.

"And no one else?" asked Stella again.

"You mean Mr. Kemp? Of course, Mr. Kemp. He has always been your faithful friend and preux chevalier, and is as devoted to you in his way as Tony is in his. Of course, Mr. Kemp," said Augusta, with studied indifference, still declining to be "drawn."

But what she declined Stella divined. Going behind the sofa, where the fair widow sat, very prosaically mending the knees of her boy's stockings, Stella bent back her head and kissed her on the forehead.

"My darling! dear, dearest Augusta!" she said softly. "No more tears now by the river-side! All dried now, Augusta, since last evening! I am so glad, so glad!"

"Silly child! What do you mean?" laughed the widow, putting up her soft white hand to caress the face bending so lovingly over hers.

"Everything. Tell me the truth. It is, is it not, Augusta?" asked Stella, in the enigmatic language of confidential women handling a love-secret daintily.

It was a language, however, that was as well understood by the hearer as by the speaker—an enigma to which each had the key. The soft, clear eyes of the pretty widow grew dark and humid, and her fresh mouth slightly quivered as she smiled.

"Yes," she said; "it is. Oh, Stella, how happy I am! Ah! my child, how I wish that you had as much true happiness as I have to-day! Waited for so long, and now come at last! So perhaps it will be for you."

"Your happiness is mine, darling," said Stella tenderly; but her soft eyes filled with tears which somewhat belied her braver words.

"It will come!" said the widow lovingly; and then the boy rushed, shouting and skipping, into the room and cut short the delicately-touched confidences of the friends by the prodigality with which he gave his own.

The promise of the glorious sunset and the message of the tranquil night were well kept in the exquisite beauty of the day. It was a day when to live was blessedness—what then was it to live, to love and to be loved! And after Augusta had fulfilled her prosaic but, all things considered, necessary domestic duty of weaving mats over the holes and running shafts up the "Jacob's ladders" of Tony's stockings, she and her two "children" went out on the sands as usual. As usual too, they were joined by the cousins and Val Cowley; and the parti-coloured web of their various lives went on weaving itself in the old way.

No great change in the external aspect of things was made this morning. They all kept in a compact body because Eth needed now cousin Sandro's arm and now Val Cowley's hand; because the one had to carry this and the other had to give her that; because dear Mrs. Latrobe—whom might she call Angusta?—was so full of information on every question she could not do without her as her charming encyclopædia; and dear Miss Branscombe—whom really she must call Stella, might she?—looked so sweet in that grey felt hat with that soft scarf wound so picturesquely round her, she must positively be put into cousin Sandro's sketch book; because she posed as a queen and lisped her songs of enchantment like a siren, and so brought both men and women under the sway of her sceptre and the spell of her power. Thus, she made it impossible for the little party to fall asunder or to follow their own devices, and she kept them briskly to their main duty of attending on her.

So the morning passed in all outward appearance of serenity, if secretly the sense of frustration, capture, disappointment and boredom rather spoiled the spirit of the thing; and in the afternoon the hotel break came round at three o'clock, as

usual, and the six souls at this moment blended in one group, re-assembled at the door for their daily drive. They had arranged to go again to that fine old castle which had been the object of their expedition on the memorable day when had arrived Sandro Kemp with his cousin Ethel White, and Val Cowley with only love as his comrade; and to some at least among them those grey old stones would wear a different aspect and tell a different story from that which they had worn and told, counting by time, not so very long ago. Counting by time not so very long ago, but by events—how infinite the space ebtween now and then!

How beautiful it was! Fresh yet genial, the air blowing from the distant mountains set like a blue barrier between earth and sky, was as if full of hope and life and faith and love; while the grand old castle, standing as a witness of the hoary past all now crumbled to ruin and decay, was also as a witness of the lush and living present in the thick luxuriant growths which spoke of spring-time and its vitality—in the subtle scents which added grace to strength—in the tender flowers which gave beauty to endurance and concealed the scars of time by the touch of love. Here somehow, the little group usually kept so close and compact did get separated. While Valentine Cowley was holding her large white umbrella over Ethel, as she leaned with plaintive grace on his strong young arm—her other hand laid on Stella's shoulder for double support to her weakness and sisterly companionship to her soul—Sandro and Augusta found themselves opportunely lost somewhere about the outer lines. They were by the side of the old dry moat where no one spied after them, and where little Tony, at once their bond and their shield, knew no more of what was passing between them than did the birds in the bushes or the lambs in the fields. It was like these two lovers not to speak of their future; not to make plans for remote days; not to anticipate dates or events. They knew that they were sure; but they knew also that Augusta would have to pass over burning ploughshares before she should come to her final peace in love. Sufficient then for the day was its joy as its sorrow; emphatically sufficient.

They walked together scarcely speaking; but sometimes his long, long look into the eyes which, no longer veiled, glassy, cold, were now so frankly tender, so eloquent of a love at once honest, pure, faithful and not ashamed, was like

speech to both; and sometimes her soft questioning was like a loving caress to him, which his smile returned. How happy they were!—how trustful, how strong! It was love without any of love's folly, void of his fears, free of his doubts; it was love which gave life and was ready for death. It was the love of a man and a woman who knew the value of the stakes for which they had played and now had won—a man and woman who had known the sorrow of the struggle before they had come to the glad triumph of the victory. But it was quiet, undemonstrative, assured, serene. It was love that was felt, not love that was made—it was love that was a fact and a vow, and in nowise a mere hope and a dream. And thus it was that in the undisturbed security of this quiet wandering through the deserted courts and alleys of the old ruined castle, the future was not touched on and the rich totality of the present was accepted almost as if it were all that was to be.

At last this pleasant ramble was interrupted by the trio whereof Ethel was the central figure. Incautiously Sandro and Augusta passed the open space whence those in the inner court looked out across the breach to the landscape beyond. The quick eyes of the "Queen" caught the passing figures; and henceforth their isolation was at an end. Cousin Sandro must be brought back to his duty of attendance, and Augusta Latrobe must be made to understand hers of subordination.

"Cousin! Cousin Sandro!" Ethel called in her clear, sweet, flute-like voice. "Cousin Sandro!"

He looked at Augusta with a smile deprecating and regretful. She looked back at him with a smile that matched his own, cheerful but regretful too. There was nothing for it however, but to turn up through the opening and go back to their former posts—their little spell of eloquent silence and loving liberty at an end.

"Cousin Sandro," said Ethel very prettily; "I do wish that you would make a sketch of this view. It is so lovely! Make a nice little sketch, cousin, and put us all in!"

Ethel was one of those women who never let a man forget his profession. If an artist, she would perpetually beg him to make a sketch of this, a picture of that, and give it to her; if a musician, no matter of what rank nor of what delicate organization, she would beg for a "little music" on an ill-toned piano, for a "nice little song" out on the lake or

the moor. Of a philosopher she would have asked, in a coaxing way: "Tell me what Hegelianism or Spinozaism is?" Of a mathematician she would have demanded the explanation of logarithms, or how "to do" algebra. Wherefore now, to cousin Sandro, she said: "Make a nice little sketch, cousin, and put us all in!" as she would have asked Tony to pull her a daisy.

"I will make a sketch if you like, but I do not know about putting you all in," said Sandro gently. "I have not time to make you perfect; and I would not like to spoil you."

"Well! do something," said Ethel with pretty authority, tapping his arm with her fan; and her cousin smiled and obeyed.

This "passed the time," as people say—that time which passes so much too quickly for us all!—until Ethel was tired of sitting there even as queen of her little court; and again they began to make those explorations which were the ostensible reason of their visit to the old ruin. By one of those odd pieces of chance shuffling which sometimes happen with people as with cards, Val Cowley and Stella were thrown together alone, to his delight and the girl's dismay. They were on that same lower line where Augusta and Sandro had walked—by the side of the old moat. This was now dry and grassy and filled with wild-flowers of all kinds; while against the walls of the outer court grew sundry rose-bushes, choked with docks and wild-briars, and themselves almost wild for lack of care and cultivation.

Valentine was in his element in a scene like this. He had a keen imagination and a facile, fluent knack of ornate speech which made a good substitute for true poetry. The present scene excited him, and the rare opportunity of a confidential talk with Stella excited him still more. Though he knew that he made no way with her and that her face was set as a flint against him, he lived ever in expectation of the new birth and the working of the miracle that was to change all. At this moment he was a knight of olden time and she was a gentle lady to whom he paid his devotions; so he launched out into time and space, and, always meaning himself and Stella, poured forth a rhapsody about the chivalrous past, of which, of course, he made his ideal society. It was a torrent of words as pretty to listen to as he was handsome to look at; and, with that undercurrent of meaning to

give it life, it was not the mere fustian that else it would have been. It had the merit of earnestness of intention, if the method was a little affected; and Stella could not be deaf to the real meaning of it all.

At last they came to a plot of rose-trees which had once been evidently objects of some care. Now they were mere graceful sweet-scented weeds, scarcely worthy of the name of roses at all. Val, having finished a spirited sketch of a tournament wherein he was the successful knight and Stella was the Queen of Beauty, suddenly changed the key-note of his fanciful melody as he stopped before this plot of neglected rose-trees.

"What an emblem of life!" he said in a melancholy voice. "What a visible sign of the wasting power of neglect and loneliness!"

Stella looked with studied indifference at the straggling, spindled bushes.

"Yes; they want pruning dreadfully! But they are of a very poor kind," she said in a dull, matter-of-fact way that had far more power of wounding in it than if she had argued the question on its merits and had laughed at the sentimental application.

Her manner was so wounding, so matter-of-fact, so chilling, that Valentine found it impossible to go on, and stopped short in his display. How could he continue these brilliant fireworks of fancy in the face of a leaden indifference which acted on his mind as some kind of paralyzing agent acts on the nerves? At times he felt as if he hated this girl whose love he was making these ever baffled, ever unsuccessful efforts to win; and this was one of them. Then his sudden ill-humour passed, and he forgave her because he loved her.

He halted for the second time before one large straggling bush, where the young pink buds were beginning to show themselves among the leaflets of tender green, through the tangle of weeds and coarser growths which threatened to choke the whole tree.

"Corisande gave Lothair a rose," he said significantly. "Will you be my Corisande and make me your Lothair? Will you give me a rose, Miss Branscombe?"

"I never act charades," said Stella coldly.

"Would it be a charade to give me a flower?" asked Val hastily.

"Something like it," returned Stella.

"Charades are acted words. What word would that make?" said Val, making an effort over himself not to be offended. "Miss Branscombe gives Valentine Cowley a rose;—what can one make out of that? Something that would express the lady's bestowal of her favour on her knight. Can you think of anything, Miss Branscombe?"

"No," said Stella curtly; "and if I knew of any word it would not fit, for certainly I shall not give you a flower, nor, if I did, would it be like a lady bestowing her favour on her knight; quite the contrary."

Now all this was rude and ungentle enough; but Stella was getting frightened at her position and felt that she must break through the toils weaving themselves around her, at once and unmistakably if at all. If only she could prevent that declaration which was so near, and which would be such a mistake when made!

Just then Tony came singing round the corner. With what a sense of relief the half-frightened, half-revolted girl called to him to come and see the beautiful green beetle in the grass at her feet, like a glittering jewel fallen from the sky to the earth! In her eagerness to escape from her present companion she fairly ran to catch the flying little Puck whose madcap humour was not to be depended on. And Val understood why. He bit the inside of his cheek savagely, and turned away humming a fragment of Offenbach to express an indifference of equal weight and measure with her own. But he failed, as of course; and Stella had the naughty girl's pleasure of knowing that she had not only saved herself from an unpleasant confession but that she had annoyed the man who had wanted to make it. For the cruellest and most heartless creature in the world is the woman who is pursued against her will by a man whom she does not like.

Val spent all that remained of the afternoon in the most devoted attention to Ethel White. But Ethel, who understood the whole science of love-making from A to Z, was not deceived by this sudden fervour, and laughed softly to herself as she looked at Stella from between her narrowed eyes.

Three days after this the train brought to St. Ann's not only Hortensia, who was expected, but Mr. Branscombe and Randolph Mackenzie, of whom no one had dreamed.

In spite of Mrs. Lyon's dislike to the proposal—perhaps a little because of that dislike and its somewhat imprudent

expression—Mr. Lyon allowed his little maid to accept Stella's invitation. And even when old Finery Fred said that he himself would take the dear child, even then Hortensia's father did not disapprove, though her mother did. He accepted the offer as frankly as it was made; but he supplemented it by slipping a bank-note into Randolph's hand, saying:

"I should like you to go, too, Ran, my boy. You will take care of your cousin; and it will be a nice outing for you."

"If any one is wanted to take care of the child I ought to go, William," said Mrs. Lyon tartly.

"Oh! she will do well enough with Stella to amuse her and Mrs. Latrobe to look after her! You are best at home with me, Cara," returned the husband.

"But why is Mr. Branscombe going?" asked Cara uneasily. "I do not like it, William; I do not like it at all!" she repeated, with the reduplication so much indulged in by weak people.

"Why should he not go to his daughter, wiseacre?" laughed her husband, a little contemptuous in his playfulness.

"William, you are blind and deaf, and worse than mad!" said Mrs. Lyon angrily. "You do not see that the child likes that old fop a great deal better than she ought; and you encourage what will some day be her ruin and your own shame. Now I have said it!" she added, folding her hands with a kind of desperate resignation to sin and its punishment.

"No, Cara, it is you who are mad," answered her husband still more angrily. "Like all silly women you run your foolish head against posts of your own making, and see dangers which do not exist out of your own heated fancy. You are always in full cry after love—love, love everywhere! An old fellow like that—older than I am—his wife not dead quite a year—and the child young enough to be his granddaughter! It hurts me to think you capable of imagining such a monstrosity," he added, getting up and walking about the room, fuming with rage against his wife, Finery Fred Branscombe, his little maid and life in general, but not against himself nor his decision.

"And when it is too late you will have to confess that I was right," said Mrs. Lyon, roused to that point of irritation which has no fear of consequence. "But you are like all men, William; you never see an inch beyond your own nose,

and you are far too conceited to allow that other people see better than yourselves!"

"I have more faith than you, both in the child's common sense and propriety of feeling, and in the natural goodness of the human heart," said Mr. Lyon loftily; "and let us hear no more about it, Cara. It is my will that she goes to St. Ann's; the change will do her good; and Ran will look after her."

"I wish I had died when she was born, and then you might have had her all to yourself and done what you liked with her for ever!" said Mrs. Lyon, bursting into tears.

But when she began to sob her husband's heart softened towards her, as indeed it always did when she broke down, if he never changed his resolution for the sake of her tears; and after having given her a friendly kind of kiss and told her not to be a fool but to trust more to him than she did, he proposed that they should have an outing on their own account while their little maid was away, and that they should go to Manchester for a week. And when he had done this, he had satisfied his masculine conscience, and henceforth held himself free to consider the whole thing at an end, and all his shortcomings atoned for.

"She is a good soul," he said to himself; "but as weak as water and as soft as butter. Still, she is a good soul, and deserves a little care when she gets low. And she shall have it."

She on her part thought:

"William is a dear old fellow, but he treats me like a child, and thinks he can make me forget how he wrongs me as a mother by giving me a little treat or a new bonnet—as if I were a mere baby or really the fool he thinks me!"

So the waxen surface here was more of a surface than either suspected the other knew.

CHAPTER XLII.

UNDER PRESSURE.

The arrival of the three new comers from Highwood shifted the whole arrangement of things at St. Ann's. To Augusta and Sandro it brought the relief of comparative freedom, with the need of still more vigilant prudence if they did not want their affairs made public property betimes; to Stella it was bondage

in the courts of purgatory—Hortensia ever between her and her father, and that father gently but inexorably thrusting her nearer and nearer to Val; to Val it was reinforcement; to Ethel White it was extension of domain and one more courtier in her train.

As for Mr. Branscombe, his desire that his daughter should marry the possessor of Greyhurst Manor was unquestionably the central point of the whole position, but one which he thought no one discerned. When he walked and talked apart with Val it was to himself as if he offered to the world a beautiful picture, whereof the motif was that of a teacher instructing an alumnus, one of the illuminati inspiring an acolyte, Mentor with Telemachus. He did not think that Ethel White said to herself: "He is trying to catch the young heir for his daughter;" that Augusta Latrobe said to Sandro: "I want Stella to marry Val Cowley, but really that old creature's manœuvres are too indelicately open;" and that Randolph Mackenzie, as clearsighted as the rest, had almost a quarrel with Hortensia because he said he wished Mr. Branscombe would not make so much of Val Cowley, and she answered loftily that Mr. Branscombe was the best judge of his own conduct, and that if he thought Mr. Cowley a fit companion for himself and Stella, he was quite right to make much of him—as he was right in everything that he did. All this was hidden from Finery Fred to whom Val was the occasion for both present display and past demonstration—his pupil now but himself rejuvenated. All the same it was an open secret that he wished this young transcript of himself to marry Stella; and that he was doing what he could to help on the affair, and force his reluctant daughter to yield to fate and his will.

Surrounded by friends though she was, Stella felt that she was like a hunted creature standing at bay—a creature, save for the faithful advocacy of Randolph Mackenzie, absolutely alone and undefended. She could not rely even on Augusta, for Augusta was on Val's side and always advocated what she called "escape" by means of him. Hortensia had lately made herself the handsome young fellow's ardent encomiast; and Ethel White followed in the same strain. So that, hemmed in on all sides as she was, the line of careful walking was fearfully narrowed for the poor child, and she scarcely knew how to escape the pitfalls which abounded.

One day they were all on the sands, as usual. Stella and

Hortensia were standing close to Mr. Branscombe; Ethel was sitting on her camp-stool under the shade of the big white umbrella which Finery Fred held over her with his best air of devotion and chivalry; Valentine Cowley and Randolph Mackenzie were on the outer margin of the group—a little to the back of Ethel—both looking at Stella; Stella was looking at the sea; Hortensia's eyes were raised to Mr. Branscombe, whose chivalrous devotion to this painted woman from India seemed to her somewhat strange and in some sort a desecration; Sandro Kemp and Augusta were at the back of all, looking at the sea, the sky, the little boy digging a hole that was to go to the middle of the earth, and at each other. By degrees they edged away from the rest, and were soon out of hearing and then out of sight, as they rounded the spur of the cliff—and the barrier of the Lover's Leap rose behind them.

Soon after this, Mr. Branscombe, at her command offering his right arm to Ethel, and having on his left Hortensia, led the march of his little cohort across the firm, clean sands. Stella took her place next to Hortensia, and heroically conquered her inclination to dispossess her as an intruder who had taken what did not belong to her—a cuckoo who was shouldering out the lawful inhabitant of the nest. She would have found it too late had she tried. The mischief had been done. Hortensia had been wiser than Stella; and flattery had proved more potent than love. Soon the stretch of dry, firm, unmarked sands narrowed to a mere slip; and the ribbed and furrowed tract, with the wet lying in the hollows, necessitated the falling back of some among them. They could not walk dryshod in a line of six. Hortensia was on Mr. Branscombe's left arm, Ethel White was on his right, as has been said; Stella and the two young men were thus walking free. Was not the fitness of things evident?

"My dear child!" said Mr. Branscombe, with his best-bred air of parental tenderness; "I pray you not to walk through that wet! Mr. Cowley, let me delegate to you my duty of care and protection. Will you kindly look after my child?"

"I do not want any one to look after me, papa," said Stella hastily.

"Dear Stella, why do you not do as your father wishes without always answering back and opposing?" said Hortensia in a low, grave, reproving voice, but distinct enough for Mr. Branscombe to hear.

As his commentary he pressed her hand against his side, and stooping his handsome head, whispered in her ear:

"Little saint! child angel! soul of seraphic purity! mind of honey sweetness!"

Stella heard the whisper, as perhaps it was intended that she should. If so, it had the effect desired, for she fell back at once, pale as death, her eyes dark with tears which yet must perforce remain unshed. Impulsively she held out her hand to Randolph Mackenzie and turned her shoulder to Val Cowley. Poor Randolph! All things considered it was rather hard on him to make him merely the shield and buckler against another—to smile on him by way of emphasizing a frown!

Soon after this Ethel said again that she was tired. Her indolent Indian habits clung to her, and she found walking for her health, as she had been ordered to do, one of the most disagreeable facts of her life. Hence she was always sitting down under this undeniable pretext of being tired; which thus made the folding-seat and the folding-footstool, the shawl, the big umbrella, and the bearers of these same, necessary parts of her equipage. To-day it was Randolph who carried the greater part of her things, while Mr. Branscombe was her knight in courtly attendance. Val Cowley, strange to say, was left free and entrusted with no particular function; and Stella, whose place with her father was taken by Hortensia and whose sisterhood with Ethel had become a little slack, was as désœuvrée as the Admirable Crichton. Mr. Branscombe, standing in an elegant attitude near Mrs. White, with a fine mingling of protection and deference in his pose, like a lord-in-waiting doing his devoir to the queen, gave the big white umbrella, which was heavy, to Randolph Mackenzie to hold, while he himself, still having Hortensia on his arm, held over her the light parasol which cost him no effort. Then turning to his daughter with a smile which he passed on with a peculiar look to Valentine Cowley, he said in dulcet tones of very positive command:

"I wish you two young people would take a brisk walk together. You have come here for your health, my dear Stella. This is not doing justice to your very admirable physician, nor to yourself, nor to me. Mr. Cowley, may I again delegate my duties? Will you kindly escort my daughter in a swift and health-giving walk across the sands?"

"With pleasure." said Val eagerly.

"No, papa." said Stella reluctantly.

"Oh, Stella, don't object so much!" again remonstrated Hortensia in her low, reproving and clearly-heard tones.

"I do not want to walk," said Stella not heeding Hortensia—standing this time fairly at bay.

"It is my wish, my dear child," said Mr. Branscombe with a singular smile. "Mr. Cowley will accompany you."

"Shall I go too, Miss Stella?" asked Randolph, oblivious of the duty to which he had been told off, and only anxious to help his dear Star whose pained and harassed look cut him to the heart.

"Yes," said Stella, as impulsively as she had offered him her hand; "do you come too, Randolph!"

"My dear. good, obtuse, young friend," said Mr. Branscombe with playful impertinence; "and this fair lady's umbrella? No; stay where you are, Mr Randolph, and do you, my dear Mr. Cowley, go as my child's guardian against the scaly monsters of the deep. And now, my dear Stella, no more opposition, I beg. Take the walk prescribed for you by circumstances and common sense—the walk which is the raison d'être of your being here at all."

"Come, Miss Branscombe;—it will do you good," said Val.

And Stella, feeling herself indeed surrounded by the tide, but not with Val Cowley this time as her saviour, suddenly withdrew her opposition and yielded to the pressure put on her. She said nothing; she simply stiffened her slender neck, as her manner was when she felt obstinate and was displeased, and set off without a word, to meet what she knew would be one of the most important crises of her life. She gave one glance of mingled entreaty and despair to Randolph as she turned away; but if she could not help herself neither could he. The Philistines were upon her and she must go through her trial to the end.

Val had had a long talk that morning with Mr. Branscombe which had finally settled the preliminaries of things. He was authorized by the father to propose to the daughter; and he was assured that she would consent—if not now then hereafter. It went against him to feel that perhaps by this Mr. Branscombe meant a little parental coercion; but he was in for it now and tired of indecision.

Scarcely knowing whether he most loved the girl he

wanted to win, or most hated her because she would not be won—wanting to see clearly the thing as it was, and to put an end to doubt or to begin his happiness—supported by Mr. Branscombe—encouraged by Augusta;—helped by his young man's vanity and spurred on by his jealousy of the past—he made Stella that offer which had so long hung fire and which it was Mr. Branscombe's intention she should accept.

And when he had made it, Stella said "No," out there in the sunlight, clearly, loudly, unmistakably. The birds heard it as they flew overhead, the wind carried it to the sea, and the sea echoed it back to the land. It was to Val as if all nature knew and scoffed at his discomfiture; as if a brazen wall had suddenly built itself up between him and her—between him and the sun—between him and all the happiness and honour of life.

"No," she said firmly, under pressure and brought to bay as she was. "I do not love you, Mr. Cowley, and I never could love you; and I will never marry you, never! never!"

"Oh," said Val cruelly; "I see you still love that fellow, Cyril, who flirted with Mrs. White till he compromised his own name and hers. Miss Branscombe! I should have thought you had had more pride than this!"

Stella turned on him as an Amazon might have turned on a curled and scented Corinthian. How her eyes flashed and the roseleaf of her cheeks deepened to flaming crimson—to blood-red fire!

"Do not you dare to speak of Mr. Ponsonby like that!" she cried with more passion than he thought she possessed. "It is no affair of yours whether I still love him or not, or what he may have done in India. I am his friend now as I always was; and neither you nor any one else shall speak against him in my presence. That is not the way to make me your friend, Mr. Cowley."

To which said Val, with less chivalrousness than pride and temper, with less manly dignity than boyish pique:

"I do not care for the friendship of a girl who can still love a man who no longer loves her."

So there went the whole house of cards;—and Stella's soul was still to be made after Mr. Valentine Cowley's plan; while her hand was yet to be won in that matrimonial market where her father had so openly placed her.

That evening Ethel White wrote a long letter to Cyril

Ponsonby. She was one of those women who spend half their lives in writing long letters to young men. It was her sole occupation after she had read the gossip columns in the weekly papers and the police reports in the daily journals. The end of the letter ran thus:

"Your old flame, Stella Branscombe, and her father are here; so are a certain Mr. Valentine Cowley who is her adorer, and Miss Hortensia Lyon who is his—I mean Mr. Branscombe's. I don't know how far things have gone with these last, but they have certainly gone some distance on that way of matrimony which some one once called the grave of love. Old Branscombe makes a perfect fool of the little girl, and she returns the compliment by making a perfect fool of him; Mr. Cowley is very assiduous in his attentions to Miss Stella, but she fights shy of him on every occasion. It is evidently a case of the father's will and the girl's dislike. She is a sweet dear creature, and I love her like my sister; and I confess I pity her. I wish that she would marry Mr. Cowley, or a certain big blundering but very good-hearted Mr. Randolph Mackenzie, who worships her down to the ground. She has trouble before her else. Her father is an old horror; and as for her future stepmother I should like to see her well shaken. Now write me a long letter of station news in return for my budget, and tell me how you and that little Letty Jones are going on. I think Miss Letty touched you? Remember me always as your sincere friend and sympathizing confidante,

"ETHEL WHITE."

"I wonder if I have done that little toad a good turn by telling Cyril Ponsonby all this?" said Ethel to herself when she had finished her letter. "She is a proud, cross, cold little wretch, but I should like to see her out of her scrape if only to spite that awful old father of hers. I wonder if Cyril likes her still? If he does he ought to come home at once and take Miss Stella to himself like that flying man who rescued the girl on the rock from the monster. Heigh ho! He would make a very nice lover—at least I should think so!" she added, with an odd little sigh.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AT THE REBOUND.

"Good-bye, Mr. Branscombe! I am off by the evening train."

Valentine tried to speak with the masterly ease of indifference. He succeeded only in speaking with the ill-concealed wrath of offended love, the savage nonchalance of wounded pride and the brusqueness of a decidedly unheroic fit of ill-temper. What a fool he had been! he thought bitterly. What made him tempt Providence as he had done, and put himself in the humiliating position of a rejected lover, when he ought to have seen and known beforehand that Stella would not marry him? She had been frank enough in her declared aversion for him. He could not blame her for coquetry, nor say that she had given a fellow false hopes. Why then, had he not accepted her lead rather than her father's false flourish of support and Augusta Latrobe's perfectly useless advocacy? It had been his own fault all through; but that did not make it the better to bear. On the contrary, it made it the worse. For he could not shelter himself behind that friendly plea of bad calculators and worse actors, and say with a flourish, accusing Providence: "Just my luck!" For just my luck had been his own wilful conduct, his vanity and his folly; and he knew it. So now when he stood at the postern gate which led from the fool's paradise in which he had been blindly walking into the stern reality of facts as they were, he had no help for it but to pass through, railing at fools' paradises in general as he stumbled over the bad places of the real thing. Wherefore he gathered up his forces and said "Good-bye" to Mr. Branscombe with affected unconcern—his departure confessing his discomfiture.

"A farewell?—going by this evening's train? Indeed! Your leaving us in the midst of our pleasant villeggiatura is sudden as it is grievous," said Finery Fred gravely.

He looked from Valentine—flushed, affectedly debonnaire, secretly angry, outwardly polite, inwardly chafing that he could not show the insolence and temper which he felt—to Stella who, now that she had finally taken her stand and shaken off her erotic incubus, was just the least bit in the

world afraid of that dear papa of hers; yet afraid only on the surface of things—resolute enough at the core!

"I must go—I—I——" stammered Val, who had forgotten to make up an excuse and who was not good at sudden reasons delivered point-blank out of the vague.

"You have received letters of business?—a telegram from the Master?—your father is dangerously ill?" said Mr. Branscombe with a disagreeable smile. "I see, Mr. Cowley!—the old chaplet of excuses to mask an inclination which we do not wish to confess."

"No inclination, sir, necessity," said Valentine.

"Stella, my child, will you not ask Mr. Cowley to remain yet a little while longer as our honoured guest?" said Mr. Branscombe with a sweet manner and a severe face.

By the way, Valentine Cowley paid his own hotel bills; but it sounded well to call him their guest; and Mr. Branscombe was a man whose poetic fancy was at all times grandly superior to the fettering contraction of literalness.

"Mr. Cowley knows best what he ought to do," said Stella with a moral hardihood which surprised herself, personally quaking, as she was, with fear of her father's certain displeasure when she should be alone with him and he should have learned all.

"Thanks for the rebuke, my child," Mr. Branscombe answered with another of his most silky and therefore most disagreeable smiles; "a rebuke somewhat sharply administered, but supremely just. Precious balms from the hand of a child, breaking a father's head but purifying his heart and directing his conduct. Thank you, my love!"

"I did not mean that, papa," said Stella earnestly.

"No?" He smiled again; this time with almost pathetic magnanimity. "Then you did what you would not. By accident you made yourself the guiding angel to your father—the lost wayfarer. By accident or design I equally thank you, my daughter."

"At all events I must go," said Val, whose ill-humour did not reach the length of liking to hear Stella virtually bullied while apparently commended, and who at this moment hated old Finery Fred almost past bearing.

"I am sorry," said Mr. Branscombe with dignity.

"Why don't you ask him to stay, Stella, when your father tells you?" said Hortensia in that low voice of hers, which sounded so dulcet, so modest and which was so audible.

"Because my daughter has not the sweet submission of her little friend," said Mr. Branscombe, answering the girl. "Because she thinks her judgment superior to her father's, and prefers the green fruit of unripeness to the golden grain of experience—that is why, my dear Miss Hortensia Lyon—and I wish it were otherwise."

"I do not wish Miss Branscombe to ask me to stay, if it is against her real wish," said Val, gallantly effacing his disappointment.

"A dutiful child should have but one wish, and that her father's," said Finery Fred with unction.

"Sometimes that is impossible," said Stella.

"As now?" her father asked with meaning.

Val turned a flushed face and a pair of darkened eyes towards the girl; Mr. Branscombe put on his pince-nez and looked at her seriously; Hortensia plucked at her sleeve and in her audible way again whispered:

"Do as your father wishes, Stella. It is too dreadful to see how disobedient you are!"

Augusta, who as yet had not taken any part in this discussion, whereof the mystery was so unconcealed and the secret so open—who had sat a little apart, watching the whole play but aside from it all—now forced Stella to look at her by the magnetic attraction of her eyes, the power of her will, the electric vitality of her thought.

"Yield!—accept Valentine Cowley as your husband, else worse will befall you," said Augusta's eyes. "You are surrounded by the tide; let him carry you from danger to safety."

It was to Stella as if she heard these words—as if they were said as distinctly by Augusta's face as they would have been by her voice. For the moment she felt as if she were carried away in the swirl of a torrent. Would she do well to obey her beloved father's will and follow her dear friend's wise advice?—or was it better to stand by her barren fidelity to the past and let the present go by the board? Would it be well to escape from home pain and personal humiliation by this—to her way of thinking—dishonourable and unblessed marriage with Valentine Cowley?—or was it better that she should bear in patience and in constancy the domestic cross of her father's displeasure—retaining as her inalienable treasure the right to love without sin to the end of her days the only man whom she ever could love?

This moral indecision lasted but for an instant. Then

came back the clear, swift, strong perception of her highest duty, her noblest self-respect.

"No," she said firmly, but with a soft voice and eyes more sad than defiant; still for all that sadness it was firmness in which vibrated not the faintest echo of weak self-surrender. "I cannot and will not ask Mr. Cowley to stay."

All was now told, all known, all confessed. Her way of escape was shut off by her own hand and henceforth she must bear the pain which she would not renounce when she could. She had chosen her part; and only her own conscience—and Randolph Mackenzie—said that she had done well and that it would have been base had she done otherwise.

So poor, rejected, disappointed Val left by the evening mail, as he said; and finally and for ever that prettily-built castle in Spain vanished into smoke, leaving a very unpleasant residuum of ashes behind.

"You have disappointed me; you have angered me; you have grievously and wantonly offended me. I consider myself humiliated and insulted; and I shall find forgiveness a difficult virtue to exercise on behalf of a perverse and ungrateful child, such as you have proved yourself to be!"

Mr. Branscombe opened his conversation with Stella later in the evening, after Valentine had left and when Augusta and Hortensia had gone to bed, with this exordium majestically delivered and very sincerely felt.

"Papa, what would you have had me to do?" cried Stella, her courage drowned in despair at this litany of reproaches from her father, once so blindly worshipped and still so fondly loved, if not so wholly believed in as before.

"I would have had you wise, modest and obedient," he answered, fixing his eyes on her with a frown. "I would have had you accept Mr. Valentine Cowley's exceedingly desirable proposals, and marry the man of your father's choice."

"Without loving him, papa?"

"Without rubbishing sentiment, without selfish consideration, without unmaidenly proclivities, and without the rootless fancy of your own silly imagination," he answered angrily. "Had you been the Stella of old days, the Stella of my hope, you would have trusted your happiness, like your mind, your will, your heart, your head, your love, to me; you would have let me regulate your life as the best architect of your fortune and you would have found what I had done,

well. Who so good a guide for his child as a loving father, with experience and a mind to comprehend life all round? I know you; and I know that exceedingly excellent young man. It was the marriage of all others most suitable, most desirable. I planned and arranged for it; and you have wilfully disappointed and, I may say, deceived me."

"No, papa, I never deceived you!" interpolated Stella.

"You are no longer my Stella," continued Mr. Branscombe, not heeding her. "You are to me as a changeling; and henceforth you must live as an exile from those deepest recesses of my heart where hitherto you have had your home!"

"Papa, do not say that!" cried Stella, covering her face.

"You have elected, and you must take the consequences," he answered coldly.

"But why do you want me to marry at all? Why do you want it?" then said the girl, suddenly looking up with a curiously scared expression. What did she think? What suspect? What foresee? "Only a short time ago you would not hear of it, and now—why do you want to force me? I love Cyril Ponsonby," she went on to say in a strange, reckless way; "and I do not care in the least for Mr. Cowley. Yet you made me break with the one and now you want me to take the other. I cannot understand it; nor why you should be so angry with me because I have not accepted a man I do not care for, when"—she stopped herself in time. It was not necessary to repeat her confession of faith within so short a time.

"I loved you too well to give you to that very ordinary young boor, Mr. Cyril Ponsonby," cried Mr. Branscombe; "and it was because I loved you that I wished you to marry Mr. Cowley—in every way your equal and fit match. Is that such a difficult problem to you, Stella?"

"But I do not want to marry any one," said Stella.

"And I wish that you should marry some one—and soon," said her father sternly.

She looked at him with her large eyes, dark and frightened.

"Papa," she said slowly; "do you want to get rid of me?"

"I wish you to marry, and to marry well," he repeated evasively.

She burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh, this is too much!" she cried in her bitter anguish of

despair. "You took me from Cyril to be your comfort and companion, and now you want me to leave you! You have broken my heart twice over, papa—I who have only loved you better than myself—better, too, than Cyril."

"Cyril! Cyril!" said Mr. Branscombe, now thoroughly roused and forgetting even to pose. "Hear me, Stella. I command you never to repeat that name in my presence again. You degraded yourself by your love for that young man in the beginning; you degrade yourself doubly by what I suppose you would call your constancy now. Let this end You have chosen, and I will say dared, to reject the choice which I had made for you. So be it. You will have to learn the mistake that you have so wilfully made. But I will not have a daughter of mine openly profess her love for a man who has definitely cast her off as this Ponsonby has cast off you. Foolish, obstinate, undutiful you may be and are; but immodest, by heavens, no!—this is more than I can bear! Do you think that precious little virginal angel, Hortensia Lyon, would act as you act? Take counsel by her sweet example, and let your shame lead you to the higher levels of repentance and the refined paths of maiden modesty."

And with this Mr. Branscombe took up his chamber candlestick and went off to his own room—one of the rare times in his life when he was absolutely in earnest, if by no means beautiful or poetic.

Meanwhile, Stella sat in the deserted sitting-room, stunned and terrified; feeling as if the very earth had given way and that the solid things of life had become floating and insecure; as if all happiness had died for ever, and that her father was sitting on the tomb where her still living Love lay buried. And the only person at the back of her consciousness, of whose approval she was sure, was her good friend Randolph—Brother Randolph—brother now more than ever!

Valentine, humiliated and sore, too pure and honest a gentleman to seek in dissipation relief from pain yet unable to live among the broken fragments of his shattered hopes and mutilated pride, started off to Highwood and the Pennefathers. There at least he would have "fun" and such distraction as this included. There he could not be poetical nor moody nor aught but "jolly" and "all there" as they said. And Gip was a good girl and thoroughly healthy-minded. And then came the question which he did not see was prompted by his wounded pride; "Was it all sincere? Did I not fancy my-

self more in love than I really was? Was Stella Branscombe so Supreme as I thought her? Did I not exaggerate my own feelings, spurred on by her coldness rather than by any living passion in myself? Was it not rather the desire to distance a rival memory than spontaneous love on my own, part?—and am I not on the whole well out of it?"

He asked himself these questions honestly and clearly; and he answered them as honestly—at least so he thought. "Yes; he was well out of it." But if he were, he had a singularly harassed look for a man just escaped from a danger; and any one would have said that, instead of escape, he had had a fall, and a heavy one. And indeed all the Sherrardine people did say so, each in his own manner, as they received him with an effusiveness of welcome which made him feel like the Prodigal Son restored to his own and regaled with the fattest of the fattest calves in the stalls. They fairly raved at him for his queer looks; and suggested all kinds of absurd explanations —all save Gip, and she by a rare accession of tact, an almost intuitive perception of thin ice, strangely foreign to her general nature, said nothing. But perhaps she noted more than the others; certainly she guessed nearer the truth.

Once only did she touch the secret sore, and then with the lightest, kindest, deftest fingers in the world. As she and Val were strolling over the lawn one evening after dinner, she turned her face up to his and said in a voice softer than hers in general, and one that slightly trembled in spite of herself:

"Val, you have come here out of tune, old man; but, remember, you have come among chaps who really love you without humbug or palaver. So you just paddle your own canoe in your own way, till you are all square again. No one shall bother you; and I'll take care that no one shall chaff you; and I will never ask what it is."

The genuine kindness, the substantial delicacy of this queer, rough speech, overcame Val.

"Come with me into the shrubbery, out of sight of the windows, Gip," he said, his voice too slightly trembling, and his manner a strange mixture of headlong excitement and almost ferocious melancholy. "Whatever is amiss with me you can cure—and you only."

Whereupon they plunged into the dark depths of the shrubbery, and there words were said which left Gip radiant as a sunbeam and Val like a thundercloud traversed by unwhole-

some lightning. They were words spoken once for all; and words which would be stuck to. And if the mother at home, in that stately place in Warwickshire, did not like them, so much the worse for her. But that would not affect the position of her future daughter-in-law. The rejected heart had been caught at the rebound, and Georgie Pennefather held the prize.

"Something has gone wrong," she said to her sister when she told her the news at night; "but, Patrick, I will never, never, never ask what it is! I am engaged to him now and I am far too jolly to whine about old scores."

"Right you are, George," said Pip between laughing and crying, kissing and sobbing; "but oh, mercy me! whatever shall I do without you! Oh, George, I shall go dead when you have gone! Val will have to marry me, too!"

"You'll get a Val of your own, Patrick, and then you'll not mind," said Gip soothingly.

But the pretence was too patent; and the two Doves sobbed and kissed each other alternately—Gip's long-desired engagement to that dear old chap, that nice old man, Val Cowley, having, strange to say, its drawbacks!

CHAPTER XLIV.

LOVE'S SHADOW—HATE.

The cure of the boy was now complete and Augusta had to return home. Not many letters had passed between her and her mother; and those which had been written were all on the daughter's side. The terrible old woman was a bad scribe at the best; and of late her bodily activities in every direction had noticeably decreased, so that she laid aside all exertion which she was not absolutely obliged to undergo. Certainly she laid aside that quite unnecessary work of supererogation—a correspondence with her daughter; and only grunted in her peculiar manner, with less pleasure than doubt and critical distaste, when she received one of Augusta's letters, largely written, fluent in word, flowing in form, and telling substantially nothing;—not even telling the important fact that Sandro Kemp and his cousin Ethel White were in the same hotel as themselves; that they all went out together to the memorable Castle, and on to the crimson sunset-

lighted sands; and that words had been spoken there which could never be recalled, and by which the whole history of life had been changed for both mother and daughter.

All this had to wait until affairs were somewhat arranged; when Augusta would say it face to face and take the consequences bravely. She knew what those consequences would be, and she did not see the wisdom of anticipation and prematurity.

Her heart light, her winsome face beautified by her inner joy, her pleasant laugh clear as silver bells, Augusta returned to the home which had been essentially her prison, as one fortified by a charm from all evil present and to come. The old woman, keen as a hawk to see all changes in the world around her, caught almost at a glance the new spirit which sat like a crown on her daughter's head.

"What is it?" she asked herself. "What has she done, or what is she going to do? She has done something; and I must find out what it is."

But she said nothing on that first evening. She thought she would wait for an opening and, when that was made, then she would enter and put all to the rout. That unknown Something which ailed her had been rather troublesome of late; and when that was troublesome her temper generally followed suit, as those who formed her household knew to their cost. Meanwhile she sat in her easy-chair, with her heavy old eyebrows lowered over her small keen eyes, watching her daughter's brightened face with its radiant crown of secret joy as her cat might have watched a bird on the lawn, waiting for the moment when it should come near enough for that fatal spring to be made.

The next day passed as this first evening had done. Augusta said little about what had happened at St. Ann's and nothing at all about Sandro Kemp. For she, like her mother, was waiting on opportunity and the fit moment and would not open the bag before the run for the creature within was open and assured. But the silence of suspicion on the one side and of reserve on the other, made itself felt between them as the dead stillness of the coming storm presages the furious outbreak at hand.

It was Sunday. All Highwood had assembled as usual in the church-porch after service, where the returned travellers were greeted with as much animation of welcome as if they had been to the North Pole and had come back laden with

sealskins and free of frostbites. Every one was, what the slang of the day calls, "in good form," and the elixir of life ran bright and clear for each and all. The Doves were especially beaming and resplendent; their saucy faces were all over dimples; their bold black roving eyes shone like highly polished spheres of ebony set in ivory; and Gip, re-transformed from her late sharp and spiny larva to something even beyond her old buoyant, breezy, butterfly self, was what she would have called a jolly good fellow to all the world and in splendid case all round. To Stella Branscombe, to whom she had been so cruel and spiteful in the dark days gone by, now that she knew her jealousy to be a mere ghost of which she held the substance, she was like the most affectionate sister. It seemed as if she tried to make up for her ill-humour and roughness by a corresponding excess of sweetness and fellowship.

"Dear Stella! how prime you look!" she said, in her clear, ringing tones, squeezing the girl's hand till she nearly made her cry out with pain. "How awfully jolly to have you back again and to see your dear little face look a mite more round and rosy than it did! You're not quite up to your old self yet, but you are not such a peaky lank as you were by miles. It was so awfully nice to see you in your old place again!—I declare I could not say my prayers as I ought for looking at you!"

"And I am glad to see you look so well, Georgie," answered Stella, smiling in her sweet way; a little surprised at the exuberance of this greeting, but glad that the cloud had passed and that Georgie Pennefather had "come out of the sulks," as Georgie herself would have called it.

"Oh! Patrick and me, we are always tight as trivets!" said that slangy, fast, objectionable young person, laughing and looking at her sister significantly: and Pip, taking up the cue, laughed and gave back the significant look with interest, shouting as her reply:

"George is tighter than any trivet, ain't you, George?"

"Rather," said the twin Dove, a wild outburst of irrepressible hilarity tumbling from her lips like a cascade of jocund waters.

"And how was old Sandro Kemp, Augusta?" asked Gip when she had done with Stella. "Val told us what a jolly little party you made. Val came here, you know, a little while after he left St. Ann's, and gave us all the news.

Fancy old Sandro and that Mrs. White with you! What larks!—jam for some one I should say, Augusta, should not you?" with impudent merriment—"poking fun" at the end of a quarter-staff.

Colonel Moneypenny, who had been speaking in a low voice and with manifest gallantry to the fair widow, caught the hated name as a man catches the echo of a challenge. He stiffened himself as if on parade and fixed his fiery eyes on Augusta's, asking her in plain language—if looks can be called plain language—"What did it mean?" and had it been the "jam" of the Pennefathers' vernacular to have had Sandro Kemp's society at St. Ann's?

He looked in vain. That waxen mask of mindless amiability for which Augusta Latrobe was famous, came over her face like a shadow, hiding the truth and her soul beneath the vacant sweetness which was her favourite weapon of defence.

"It was very pleasant to have them there," she answered. "Mr. Kemp is always good-natured, and Mrs. White"—"That was Cyril Ponsonby's chum," shouted Gip parenthetically—"Mrs. White is a very remarkable kind of woman," continued Augusta, not noticing the parenthesis.

"What way?" asked Gip, elliptical when she was not vulgar, and ungrammatical always.

"She is a thorough Anglo-Indian," said Augusta, as if this were an explanation.

"And flirts like fun all round," cried Gip.

Augusta laughed that vacant, mindless little laugh of hers which meant nothing.

"Why, she tried it on Val, who hated her, and on old Kemp as well!" said Gip. "But Val said that didn't run! Old Kemp knew better than that; and so did some one else, didn't they, Augusta?"

"Mr. Kemp did not flirt with her, so far as I could see," answered Augusta, with that kind of crass literalness which makes an effectual barrier against further conversation; at least with most people. It did nothing with Georgie Pennefather.

"But if he did not with her, he did with some one else," she said in a loud whisper; "and from what Val said we may be looking out for orange-blossoms in good earnest this time. Oh, you sly-boots! oh, my! Augusta! Those spoons, then, were true; and you looking all the time as if butter would not melt in your mouth!"

Augusta laughed again. It might be in deprecation or in acceptance of the charge, who can tell? Not even Colonel Moneypenny watching her so closely, nor Dr. Quigley, who was watching both.

"I was not aware that Mr. Kemp was one of your party," the Colonel then said slowly, his face livid, his deep-set eyes burning like two coals blazing from among the ashes.

"No?" answered Augusta, her eyes raised to the level of his cravat, not beyond. "He came there with his cousin a week after we went."

"And stayed there all the time?"

"Yes; we left them still there," she answered with the prettiest air of girlish frankness and most admirably-acted indifference.

"When is it to be, Augusta?" asked Gip.

"When is what to be, Georgie?" answered the widow.

"Orange-blossoms and old Kemp," laughed that saucy minx.

"Ah, when?" said Augusta. "I will tell you when you wear your orange-blossoms for Val Cowley!" she added, drawing her bow at a venture—Stella with her father and the rest of the Highwoodites being a little in advance and quite out of hearing.

"I'll take you at your word!" shouted Gip, as she and Pip, laughing like two mad creatures, rushed off down the lane which led from the high road to Sherrardine.

"She had you there, George," laughed Pip. "I wonder if she knows!"

"Oh, it was only a fluke!" said Gip. "But who cares? It'll have to be told soon; I don't care how soon; and I don't care who knows, do you, Patrick?"

"No, I am too awfully jolly about it to want to keep it dark," said Pip; and her sister answered frankly: "So am I."

Too much or too little had been said for the Colonel's peace. It was or it was not; and in any case he must know which. Fortunately he had not committed himself; fortunately for his dignity he had not made that offer which more than once had been so near and which a merciful Providence had always prevented. But he must know the truth. For his own sake he must be put in possession of facts as they stood; and if Mrs. Latrobe would not confide in him of her own free will, he must force her hand as he had

tried in vain to do once before. But this time something told him that he should be more successful.

"You were much with your old friend?" he began, in his thin rasping voice, as the main body of Highwoodites moved along the highroad.

"Yes, very much," said Augusta, with her most inane smile.

"And he was as charming as ever?" returned the Colonel.

"I did not see any difference in him," she said.

"You were always his advocate, I remember," said the Colonel.

She smiled again.

"Yes? Was I?" she replied; adding: "What a lovely day this is!"

"Where does Mr. Kemp live now? And what does he do since he came into his fortune?—that fortune of which, by all accounts, he stood so much in need?" asked the Colonel.

"He has been away," she said; "and I do not know what he does."

"No? You do not know what he does? That is strange;" he returned with satirical emphasis.

"Is it?" she replied good-temperedly. "How beautiful those distant hills are!"

"You are glad to return to your old home?" said the Colonel, suddenly changing front and speaking with tenderness as little disguised as his bitterness had been.

"Home is always home," was the safe rejoinder.

"And you will not leave us again?"

"My trunks are not packed," she returned with a sweet little smile.

"You will stay here for ever among us? We miss you so much when you go!"

The Colonel spoke with still more pronounced tenderness. All the same his eyes were bloodshot and fiery and his smile was more acid than sweet.

"You are very good," she returned.

"I should like to keep you for ever," said the Colonel. "Do you remember how happy we were that stormy day, when my house was your shelter?"

"When was that?" said Augusta, as if considering. "Oh, yes! I remember now. I took shelter in your house from the snowstorm. What a dreadful day it was!"

"My house was then a real shelter?" he asked in a lowered voice.

"Well, the snow did not come in through the roof, so I suppose it was!" said the widow lightly. "What a contrast between that day and this!"

"That was the happier for me," said Colonel Moneypenny.

"You like winter best? I like spring and summer," she said.

"And the sea-side better than the inland country?" he asked.

Augusta put on her mask close and tight.

"Sometimes," she said with the very sublimity of vacuity. "It all depends."

"On what?"

"On the weather," she answered, holding out her hand as they came up to The Laurels. "Good-bye, Colonel Moneypenny. Good-bye, dear," to Stella, who was walking with Randolph Mackenzie. "Take care of yourself, dear child," she added with tenderness.

Stella whispered: "Has he found out?" and by her whisper, which he could not hear, excited the man's suspicion and jealousy afresh.

All that night Colonel Moneypenny lay awake, half mad with this jealousy, this suspicion, which burned like fire and ran like poison in his veins. Baffled as he had been, he was far from being convinced that Augusta's apparent unconcern was real, and he determined to have it out. Cost what it might, his self-respect demanded that he should know the truth. Wherefore, full of this determination, he went to The Laurels the next day, as he had done once before, prepared to dig the pit into which the woman, for whom his love so often took the form of love's shadow—hate—should fall; this time never to rise again.

The greetings were given and all the proper formalities of preliminary courtesy were gone through, even more punctiliously than usual. It was the salute of the duellist, the hand-shake of the prize-ring after the caps have been thrown down to show that they are "there."

"What kind of person is Mrs. White?" asked the Colonel, turning to Augusta and speaking suddenly.

"In what way?" replied the widow, the colour beginning to mount into her face very slowly, very quietly, but unmistakably; "in beauty or character?"

"Both," he said.

Mrs. Morshead looked a little lost.

"What Mrs. White?" she asked.

"Mr. Kemp's cousin," said Augusta, as steadily as if she had said Tony's new hat: Then, to give the conversation a turn, if possible, she added: "She is the person about whom and Cyril Ponsonby all that gossip was made in the winter."

"It was odd, was it not, that she should have gone to St. Ann's without her husband, and only escorted by a man like Mr. Kemp? Cousin or not, that was a little queer, I think."

Colonel Moneypenny said this with his well-known acid smile—that smile which, more than all else, expressed the burning passion that he did his best to conceal.

"They have been brought up together, and are like brother and sister; and Captain White is in India," said Augusta, neither faltering nor quailing for all that her mother's eyes were fixed on her with ominous surprise, with sharp suspicion and with the very darkness of latent wrath.

"Nevertheless it argues a large amount of trust in Captain White," said Colonel Moneypenny, still smiling in his sharp, acid way. "He could not have known that you would have been there to act as a—what shall I say? I cannot say chaperon, but rather as a counter-charm, a more powerful attraction."

"He probably knew both his wife and his cousin, when he sent Ethel home," replied Augusta, tranquilly as to manner, but the tell-tale flush had deepened now to burning crimson on her face.

"What does all this mean?" asked Mrs. Morshead. She had been sitting in her chair, stiff and upright as if she had been cased in iron; her eyebrows nearly meeting, and her eyes almost concealed beneath their shaggy fringe. "Was that sign-painter, Sandy Kemp, at St. Ann's, Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma," answered her daughter.

"And you spoke to him?"

"Yes."

"Were good friends with him?—as if nothing had happened?" asked the mother.

Colonel Moneypenny laughed in a forced, affected, rasping kind of way.

"Quite good friends and something more, if report speaks

true!" he said with pretended lightness. "Come now, confess, Mrs. Latrobe, was it not so?"

"Really, Colonel Moneypenny, your question is too enigmatical either to answer or understand," said Augusta, she also laughing with affected lightness.

"Don't be hypocritical, Augusta," said her mother savagely. "Colonel Moneypenny is quite easy to understand; and you know he is; and answer that question directly: Were you good friends with Sandy Kemp, and something more?"

The young widow looked at her mother, and from her to her former lover now her bitterest enemy. She was not defiant, not insolent, but she was calm and strong as if prepared for all encounters. She seemed to draw her graceful figure somewhat together, as if she stiffened her shoulders and strengthened her neck to bear—and to bear triumphantly.

"Yes," she said, in a low, clear voice; "we *are* good friends—friends and something more, for life."

Colonel Moneypenny's livid face grew as pale as the face of a dying man; then the blood came back into his thin, worn cheeks as if a hot flood of fire poured through his veins.

"I thought so!" he said in a suffocated voice. "I knew it months ago!"

"Then you knew what I did not," said Augusta. "Our meeting at St. Ann's was by chance."

"You sit there, Augusta, and quietly tell me that you love that impudent fellow?" asked Mrs. Morshead, with portentous stillness.

"Yes, mamma, I do; I am sorry that you do not. You would if you would but let yourself know him," answered her daughter.

"You are going to marry him?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Then before Colonel Moneypenny I say it, you leave my house to-day—you and your boy. No second wife shall darken my doors with her shameless sin; and I would rather see a daughter of mine in her grave than the wife of Sandy Kemp. You have chosen between him and me, Augusta. Go to your precious bargain, and never let me see your face again! You are no daughter of mine, and never have been!"

"Mrs. Morshead!" remonstrated the Colonel.

His revenge had a little overstepped itself. He had wanted to punish the woman, whom once he had loved, but not to this extent. This retribution was too savage, too

severe, even for such an offence as hers, and for such revenge as his.

"Do not plead for me, Colonel Moneypenny!" flashed out Augusta, turning round on him with one of her rare outbursts of passion. "Leave my mother and me to settle our own affairs by ourselves. Be satisfied with what you have already done, and leave the rest alone. You have revenged yourself enough."

He started to his feet.

"I might have done more," he said cruelly: "and were I not a gentleman and a man of honour, I would."

She shrugged her shoulders with a disdainful gesture. That was her sole answer to his assertion of gentlehood and honour.

"If you have more to say, say it out, Colonel Moneypenny," said Mrs. Morshead, who, in this little passage at arms, secretly sided with her daughter, liking her spirit.

"Madam," said the Colonel grandly; "I respect your age too much to afflict you more than you are afflicted already; and to your daughter I leave the stings of her own conscience. Good-day, madam, and accept my sympathy; you need it."

With no word of adieu to Augusta, he turned and left the room, leaving the mother and daughter together and alone.

"Now, Augusta," said Mrs. Morshead, as the house-door shut against the young widow's foe; "you know what is before you; you don't sleep another night in this house, neither you nor your boy. So go and pack, and never dare to cross this threshold again. If I want you I will send for you; but I think I would rather die by the road-side than do that. No, don't come near me, Augusta. I don't want to wish you good-bye. You have deceived me all through, and now I have done with you and yours for ever. Go; and don't come back to take leave; only let me know that you have gone and that I shall never see you again."

"Mamma!" said Augusta in a pleading voice.

"If you do not want me to lay my curse on you, Augusta—a mother's curse, a dying woman's curse—leave me now and for ever!" almost shouted Mrs. Morshead, carried out of herself by passion. "Leave me, you bad, ungrateful, shameful girl! Would that you had never been born!"

So Colonel Moneypenny's work had not been quite fruitless to-day, and Love's shadow—Hate—had fallen in good truth with power across the young widow's path.

Presently Mrs. Morshead rang the drawing-room bell twice, sharply.

"Take me to bed, Martha," she said feebly, when her maid appeared. "Take me to bed, hussy. I have had my death-blow."

CHAPTER XLV.

AS HIGH AS HIS HEART.

Mr. Branscombe was sitting on the seat under the cedar-tree on the lawn. He was turned sideways to the house, and thus looked down the grounds towards the Lodge and the road. It was odd to see him sitting there alone. In all her experience Stella did not remember such a strange departure from his normal habits. She remembered to have seen him there with her mother. She herself had sat with him there; but that this solitude-hating father of hers should have gone out and deliberately placed himself under the cedar-tree alone was strange indeed.

Laying aside her present work—she was painting a bouquet of roses on a length of white velvet to be hereafter made into a sachet, scented with attar of roses, for his shirts—she went out to him, timidly. She had become timid in these latter days—timid because he was relentless and cold, unforgiving and displeased. Since Val's rejection by her and public betrothal to Georgie Pennefather, the relations between the once idolizing daughter and the fondly receptive father had been strained almost to the breaking point and chilled almost to the freezing. Nevertheless, in the foolish way of loving women, she tempted Providence and defied probabilities, and went out to her father sitting there alone on the seat under the cedar-tree on the lawn—where she used to sit so often with Cyril in the happy days of long ago—though if she had stopped to reflect she would have known that the chances were she would be snubbed for officiousness and made to feel unwelcome.

"You here alone, dear papa! I do not like to see you alone!" she said with a caressing accent and a coaxing smile, both sadly dashed by fear.

"Alone!" he answered with mock mournfulness; "alone! When am I ever aught but alone?"

To Stella it seemed that, what with Hortensia Lyon as his

constant chorus, Randolph Mackenzie as his obedient copyist, and the whole visitable world of Highwood for ever flowing through his gates, this dear father of hers was not much alone when you came to think of it and sum up the whole matter. But she was wise enough not to say this. She only smiled again with a timid, coaxing kind of air, as she said:

"May I stay with you, papa?"

He turned his grey eyes on her slowly.

"As my companion?" he replied. "But companionship includes sympathy; and the only sympathy possible between a father and daughter is in the unlimited obedience of the latter to match the tender prevoyance of the former. By your act of disobedience you have severed that bond of sympathy which once existed and which should have always existed between us. Will your presence, your bodily presence, Stella, free me from the spiritual loneliness which oppresses me?"

"Are you never going to forgive me, papa?" pleaded the girl, tears in her eyes.

"My dear Stella," he answered; "all actions bear their logical consequences. It is not a question of voluntary forgiveness, or of intentionally nursed wrath to keep it warm on my part. You have done a certain action and the consequences are so-and-so—as necessary, as logical, as inevitable as if you had put your hand into the fire and thus had burned your flesh. Let me hear no more childish folly about 'forgiveness.' It is fate, logic, circumstance, necessity, that we should discuss; because it is fate, logic, circumstance, necessity, under which we live, not the nursery puerilities of a little child who breaks her doll without knowledge or design—then asks to be forgiven for what is not a fault. Your action was not this, my dear Stella. Your action was deliberate and foreseeing disobedience to my will. The logical consequence therefore, is my paternal displeasure and the solution of continuity in our amicable relations."

"Papa! I did not think you could have been so cruel!" cried Stella, the very passion of despair in her voice.

"Had you not better return to the house, my dear Stella?" said her father with frosty civility and a deadly kind of courtesy. "Would you not think it well to resume such occupations as you might have been engaged in? I wish to reflect and meditate on a certain course of action on my own part, and I desire to be left in solitude—the solitude to which you yourself have doomed me."

On which Stella, obedient and dejected, went back into the drawing-room; but she put away that square of white velvet and her jar of roses, and did no more to-day to that sachet, scented with attar of roses, which she wes painting for her dear papa's fine-worked shirts. The spirit had gone out of her hand, and she could as little have drawn the forms or laid the colours as she could have sympathized with her father's thoughts, had she known them, as they buzzed like bees beneath the cedar-tree and drew themselves across his brow like long lines of light traversing the darkness.

His sainted Matilda among the angels in heaven and therefore of no use to him here on earth—Stella, a disappointment and worse; by no means now the Star of his Home in whose pure rays he was to find comfort, guidance and companionship, but a very uncomfortable and shabby little farthing rushlight which served only to make the surrounding darkness more visible—Randolph Mackenzie, a mere bit of human mechanism, a cleverly-constructed grub, good for a certain amount of caligraphic ability and good for nothing else—the fount of his genius drying up for want of that praise and devotion, that loving flattery, that stimulating absorption which made its only real source—Mr. Branscombe had but one shrine to which to turn, one rock by which to anchor. Let the world say what it would, he had resolved. He had his own life and comfort and genius to think of first of all things. Let the herd rave. Is not a poet superior to such ravings? and must not Egeria be his chief care? So he had resolved, as has been said; and the moment for putting his mental determination into deeds had come. Presently Stella saw her father get up from his seat and walk across the lawn. His gait and air had something in them more than usual—a curious blending of the majesty and courtesy, the grace and dignity for which he was famous, with a haste, an eagerness not often shown at all and never so strongly marked. Then she saw him lift his broad-brimmed hat and stand uncovered in the sunshine, as he took Hortensia's hand and drew it within his arm, bending his handsome head as if speaking in low tones while they walked slowly back across the lawn to the seat beneath the cedar-tree from which he had just risen—that seat on which so much of the Branscombe family life had been transacted.

"She here again! Why! she was here this morning!—and she did not tell me she was coming again this afternoon.

I cannot bear it much longer! I know I shall quarrel with her," said Stella to herself, colouring with vexation.

Then she turned pale and shivered with something more serious than vexation, as her eyes were fixed with a kind of fascination on her father and her friend.

"Child, do you know that you have grown?" said Mr. Branscombe in his most dulcet tones, as he placed Hortensia on the seat and drew her close to his side, so close that she leaned against his arm—which was what she liked.

The little Puritan, feeling that something was in the air, was pale and trembling, not knowing whether she ought to feel frightened or elated, hopeful or despairing. What was the meaning of this exordium? Had she grown beyond her place of supplementary daughter? of youthful Egeria? of childlike chorus and artistic shield-bearer—and was she therefore to be banished? Had Stella's jealousy been too much for her, and was she to suffer from it in the diminution, if not total cessation, of the friendship which made her life's joy and was her crowning honour, and without which it seemed to her that her days would become a dull dead blank scarce worth the trouble of traversing? What did this sublime and lovingly-adored man mean by her having grown?—that she had outstretched her precious privileges?

"Grown?" she repeated, her voice a little unsteady; but she did her best to keep her manner natural and as if unconcerned. "No; I have not grown, dear Mr. Branscombe; not for the last year. And at all events," she added, her pale lips forcing themselves to smile; "I hope that I have not grown beyond your affection or my dear old place at Rose Hill."

"Yes; you have grown within this last year; and you have grown beyond your place at Rose Hill," said Finery Fred in a low soft voice—how often used before in life!—stooping his head to look into her face and smiling at her fear, at her pretence of calmness, at her girlish nervousness altogether. "You have grown indeed—'as high as my heart,' Hortensia! Grown into my heart I may say; grown so closely one with myself that I cannot live without you—that the days are dull when I have not you as my rosy-fingered dawn, my noonday sun, my evening star—grown round me as the ivy round the oak, so that I cannot be separated from you. And now I ask you to leave your home and come to mine—to tell me that I may count on your devotion and companionship to the end of

my days—to assure me, with that refined and gracious little mouth whose delicate curves are real enchantment to me, that you will never leave me again. Will you, sweet child?"

Again the girl was uncertain of his meaning. Was this an offer of marriage or of adoption? She did not know; and truth to say, for herself she did not care which it might be. She only knew that the dearest wish of her heart was to be able to devote herself to Mr. Branscombe—to live with him always and never leave him; but it was all one to her whether she were his wife or his daughter so long as her position was secure and her devotion had free outlet.

"There is nothing on earth that would make me so happy as to dedicate my life to your service," she said, raising her eyes to his with almost religious exaltation of worship shining in them.

For though she was silly to excess, and in some sense artificial, she was terribly in earnest in her admiration for this imposing bit of froth and foam, this sham Apollo, this pasteboard Jupiter in whom she believed throughout, and whom she loved and reverenced in equal proportions.

"But have you foreseen consequences?" Mr. Branscombe went on to say. "If friends deride? If home influences interfere with this sweet union of our souls, can I count on holding you contrary to the will of your parents? Loving you, child, as I do, can I be the one all-sufficient in your life? Ought I ask for so much from you?"

"Oh, Mr. Branscombe!" said Hortensia in frank agony; "you will not let any one divide us after to-day? You will not send me away again after having opened your house to me? You will let me live with you, whatever any one says?"

She laid her clasped hands on his shoulder. It was with an effort that she did not fling herself across his breast.

For answer, Mr. Branscombe put his arm round her waist—there, in full view of the house; Stella, standing just within the open frame of the window, irresolute whether to go and speak to her friend—or to her who was assumed to be her friend—or whether to stay quietly where she was and let the two manage by themselves what seemed somewhat important business. His arm round her waist, in full view of the house; of Stella, undecided what to do and full of secret trouble; of Jane Durnsford, watching from poor dear Mrs. Branscombe's room for what she had long expected; of Jones and the rest of the servants, peeping from the staircase windows; of the

gardener and the gardener's lad, peering from behind the laurustinus bushes in the shrubbery;—there, in full view of earth and sky, of man and the gods, Mr. Branscombe once more stooped his lordly head, and this time kissed the girl long and tenderly on her trembling lips.

"My kiss of consecration," he said grandly. "The kiss which claims you as my child-wife."

"Oh! if you mean to marry me, no one *can* divide us," said Hortensia naïvely, smiling with the happiness of relief from dread, as her fears were now at rest. Adoption, with a father and mother of her own alive, might have been difficult, but marriage was an honourable state; and she was secure.

Womanlike, even at this supreme moment, she glanced timidly towards the house and saw Stella standing within the window-frame, looking at them. Even at this distance the whiteness of her face and the darkness of her eyes were visible; and her whole look and attitude suggested an avenging spirit.

"Oh!" cried Hortensia in genuine terror. "Stella has seen!"

"Sweet trembler! have no fear. Trust in me—I am your protector, now," said Mr. Branscombe with tranquillizing dignity, again pressing her to him as if to make the whole thing more plain and evident. Turning to the house, he called out to his daughter. "Stella, come here, my dear child," he said blandly. "I have to speak with you."

Stella came forward; very slowly, very reluctantly.

To have seen her dear papa kiss Hortensia Lyon—kiss her as if he meant it—was almost as if she had seen him transformed into the likeness of the Prince of Darkness himself. It was a sin, was it not?—a crime?—something to grow hot and cold over, to blush for, to be ashamed of, to tremble at? What could it mean? Why should he kiss Hortensia Lyon, who was not his own child?—he, that fastidious and delicate-minded papa who had left off kissing his own daughter, and who, not so long ago, had held a long and wonderfully-refined discourse on the grossness of personal demonstrativeness and the sweetness of absolute reticence and stillness. And now he was kissing Hortensia Lyon on the seat under the cedar-tree, full in view of the house and its inmates!

She had found no solution to the terrible enigma by the time she had come up to the two, still sitting closely pressed together; Mr. Branscombe, with his arm round Hortensia's

waist—Hortensia, with her hands clasped in his, and their whole look and attitude eloquent of more than the mere arrangement of a new picture, the inspiration of a new poem.

Mr. Branscombe, mindful of the future fitness of things, forcibly held Hortensia to her place and prevented her rising to greet his daughter. This last came to pay homage, not to receive the courtesy of an equal; and the child-queen must know her place. But if he prevented her rising, he loosed her clasped hands, took one and laid it in his daughter's, covering both with his own.

"Love each other, my dear children," he said theatrically. "Stella, my daughter, receive your former friend as your father's sweet companion and peerless source of inspiration and joy. I present you, my dear Stella, to my child-wife—the sweetest and most sacred Egeria of my genius."

"Your wife, papa!" cried Stella, shrinking back as if she had been struck.

"My wife!" he repeated loudly, so loudly that all the listeners and peepers round heard the word.

Stella turned away abruptly, her hands clasped over her eyes and her whole being overcome with grief, passion and despair.

"Papa!" she cried after a moment's pause, taking her hands from her face and confronting them with a wild, heart-broken expression. "You say this here, where my mother lived—where she hears you now, up there, in heaven!"

"What a cruel girl you are, Stella!" sobbed Hortensia. "What has a dead wife to do with her husband's second marriage?"

"And if your sainted mother does view this scene from her home in the realms of bliss, my dear Stella," said Mr. Branscombe; "she will rejoice that I have supplemented such an unsatisfactory daughter as she bequeathed to me, with a wife made after my heart and her own model. So that calling on the name of your mother to bring distress upon your father's future wife does no good to any one, my dear Stella. It simply recoils in confusion on your own head. And now, my dear, that I have informed you of the momentous decision of the hour, I will not detain you from your avocations. Your sweet little friend will excuse you, and I give you leave to withdraw."

But if that good Matilda in the realms of bliss was so certain to rejoice at this inauspicious union of January and

May, Hortensia's parents took another view of things, and one not quite in harmony with the venerable idol and his youthful adorer. Mrs. Lyon was specially furious, though secretly not wholly displeased that events had vindicated her better judgment and that her husband was thus forced to acknowledge the superiority of her insight.

"I told you so, William, twenty times!" she said, when Hortensia, who knew better than Finery Fred how to manage her parents, had given them the startling news of her betrothal; on the hearing of which her mother had ordered her angrily from the room, her father not objecting. "You would not believe me, but I have seen it all along. I was certain of it from the very first!"

"Then if you were so certain you should have prevented it," said her husband with masculine injustice. "What was the good of being certain then, and doing nothing? And what is the good of saying all this now, when it is too late?"

Mrs. Lyon burst into those tears which mean less pain than passion, and were born less of grief for Hortensia's wayward folly than of wrath with her husband's injustice.

"That is just like you, William! Just like you men!" she said angrily. "You take all the power out of our hands and refuse to believe a word we say—spoil the children and weaken our authority—and then you blame us when things go wrong which we might have prevented if we had been allowed. You would not let me have the smallest influence over Hortensia; and now you blame me because she has got into a disgraceful scrape and made worse than a fool of herself for life!"

"A disgraceful scrape!—No disgrace at all!" said Mr. Lyon sharply. "Disgrace? What disgrace, Cara? I am ashamed to hear you talk so! There is a little disparity in years, certainly; but where is the disgrace, I want to know, of a girl marrying a man like Mr. Branscombe? Good family, stainless reputation, more than well-to-do, fine person, unquestionable attainments—what disgrace is there in all this, I say?" he repeated, energetically drumming on the table as he warmed to his work of advocacy and defence.

"A man old enough to be her grandfather—a man years older than her father—the father of her most intimate girl-friend—his wife dead only just a year—it is horrible!—it is sacrilege!" said Mrs. Lyon shuddering.

"Pshaw! The age of the man does not signify. If it had

been the other way you might have talked," said Mr. Lyon disdainfully.

"Then if I died, I suppose you would think of marrying Stella," said Mrs. Lyon with weak sarcasm.

"More unlikely things might happen," returned Mr. Lyon, with a peculiar kind of sniff familiar to his intimates. "But there is not much likelihood of your giving me any chance," he added good-naturedly; "so we need not discuss improbable hypotheses. We have enough to do with things in hand. And after all, Cara," he continued in a softer voice, going over to his wife and laying his broad hand on her still round shoulder; "things might have been worse for the child. 'Better be an old man's darling than a young man's slave,' don't you know? and our little maid is peculiar and has fads of her own."

"Peculiar and something more!" put in Hortensia's mother in a low voice. The "peculiarities" of her daughter had so often vexed her, she was glad to be able to have her fling at them without much fear of rebuke.

"I confess I have had other views for her," Mr. Lyon went on to say, wisely not hearing his wife's undertones. "And I am disappointed more than you can be, Cara. But she has chosen for herself; and perhaps she knows what she wants better than we do. She may have done for the best. Mr. Branscombe is old and therefore will have a gentler hand over her than Ran would have had. Ran is the best fellow in the world, but he is a bit of a bumbler when all is said and done; and our little maid has always been fastidious and over-sensitive. I know she had it at heart to make something of Ran; but, Lord, what can you do with a good honest dunderhead like that? Perhaps an artistic, musical, picture-making old fellow like Fred Branscombe, who will keep her in cotton-wool and cocker her up like a little queen, will be better for her than poor old Ran, God help him! who opens his round eyes when she goes on her high ropes, and looks as if she were talking Hebrew when she launches out about the divinity of art and the—what is her favourite word?—the preciousness, yes the 'glorious preciousness' of a dab of colour here or a twirligig on the piano there. No; Ran would hardly have cottoned to that, I reckon!" he said with a queer kind of laugh. "At all events," he added in the tone of a man who has taken a resolve and means to keep it; "at all events, Cara, it is her deliberate choice; and I won't have her bullied. You hear me,

Cara? I won't have her bullied; and we must respect her choice."

"Oh, William, how can you be so foolish!" cried Mrs. Lyon. "If that child proposed murder you would sanction it! You cannot spoil her enough, it seems to me!"

"When she does propose murder and I do sanction it, then you may cry out," answered Mr. Lyon quietly. "Meanwhile the main question is—she loves that old fellow and wants to marry him. Whether it is good taste or bad, she wants to marry him. And I give my consent to the thing, and say again, I won't have her bullied; so look where you go, Cara."

"I wish I was dead!" said Mrs. Lyon in a rage.

Whereupon the conversation ended, and Hortensia, recalled to the drawing-room, was informed by her father that she was a little fool, but that she was old enough to know her own mind and to follow out her own course. And she was to come and give him a kiss; and God bless her, and grant her happiness in the years to come! She and his youthful son-in-law would make a pretty pair and be well matched for height and age, he added, not able to resist this little fling at Finery Fred; but he hoped the dear boy would be dutiful to himself and attend to what his dear mother-in-law might have to say to him. She would probably have a great deal to say, he added with a queer smile. With the same queer smile he hoped that Stella Branscombe would agree with her step-mother; and that the two Queens of Brentford would not fall out about the wearing of the crown.

To all of which Hortensia answered only a few prim and respectful monosyllables. She knew her father's humour, and so long as she got her own way she did not interfere with the wording of her charter.

But when she drew herself out of his arms, and went over to kiss her mother and to receive her blessing also, Mrs. Lyon, on pretence of wiping her eyes, turned away her face till she left just the tip of her ears and the nape of her neck as the only kissable tracts; saying, in a low voice, so that her husband should not hear;

"I cannot give you my blessing, Hortensia! This marriage seems to me too monstrous for God or man to bless. I cannot sanction it!"

"Monstrous!" repeated Hortensia in a loud voice. "It is a marriage which God Himself has made and sanctified!"

"Now, Cara, what did I say just this minute?" cried Mr. Lyon, guessing at the truth as Hortensia meant that he should. "No bullying and no opposition, if you please. The thing is done, and we have both—both, mind you?"—with emphasis—"accepted the situation. There is no good in doing things by halves, and I will not spoil the cloak for the sake of the thread. So," ringing the bell; "we will drink to the health of our future son-in-law in a bottle of champagne, and long life to the happy pair!"

"That, wild horses should not make me do!" said Mrs. Lyon, bursting into an hysterical passion of tears and hurrying out of the room.

CHAPTER XLVI.

NO WORSE THAN THE REST.

"I DO not believe it," said Mrs. Morshead with feeble ferocity, half raising herself from among the pillows whereby she was supported in her bed. "I do not believe a word of it, Martha! You are just cheating me with lies, like all you hussies. There was never one among you that could speak the truth."

"No, ma'am, it is gospel truth," answered Martha. "All the place is talking of it; and no one seems to think of anything else."

"Then don't tell me any more about it. I don't want to hear of such wickednesses," said the old woman savagely. "They ought both to go to Bridewell; that's what I say to it; and the law should step in to prevent it. A mere baby like that and an old fellow who might be her great-grandfather—it is a shame and a sin—worse than heathen Mormonism, I declare it is. It makes me ill to think of it."

"Well, ma'am, I'm sorry I told you," said Martha penitently. "I didn't expect you to take it to heart like that. I told you only to amuse you and pass the time."

"Then you don't amuse me, and I would rather not pass my time in such shameful thoughts," said Mrs. Morshead crossly; and Martha, who knew her, held her peace.

Presently the old woman spoke again.

"And when is the marriage to take place?" she asked quite suddenly.

"Well, ma'am, as soon as Miss Lyon can get her things

together," said the maid. "They do say that Mrs. Lyon is that put out she won't lend a hand to one mortal thing, and that Miss Lyon she has no one to help her but her pa'. But then they say a heap of things here at Highwood."

"And if Mrs. Lyon is put out and won't help, she is quite in the right," snapped Mrs. Morshead; "and now go down and get your dinner."

"It's not time yet, ma'am," said Martha, who was a devoted soul and had all the nursing, night and day, on her shoulders. But they were sturdy ones; and she worked through her task without too great fatigue.

"I tell you it is," said her mistress sharply. "Go down, I say, and don't come back till I ring."

"Whatever has she in her head now!" said Martha to herself as she left the room. "For most parts she can't abear me out of her sight, and now to-day, when she's so much weaker and looks so strange, she sends me off afore my time. Well, poor dear, the Lord's will be done!—but He made a queer lot when He made her!"

Left alone, Mrs. Morshead shut her eyes and thought. She knew as well as Martha—as well as Dr. Quigley would have known, had she suffered him to come near her—that her end was at hand, and that the mysterious malady which had so long held and oppressed her, had now almost reached its fatal culmination. Not her days, but her hours, were numbered, and she was dying, unreconciled to her daughter. She laid there and thought; and tears began to steal silently down her withered, parched and miserable face. Presently a few sobs burst from her lips with the irrepressible impulse of bodily weakness. A board creaked in the next room—the dressing-room—belonging to this, the best room in the house—the door between the two standing very slightly ajar. The old woman dried her eyes as hurriedly as if her tears had been sins of which she was ashamed.

"Who is there?" she cried sharply.

There was no answer, and the boards ceased to creak. For a moment she looked anxiously to the door; then with a fresh sob, this time of disappointment, she said to herself, but not aloud: "I thought it might have been that bad girl. I think she might have come to see me when she knows how ill I am."

She rang the bell twice hurriedly.

Martha was by her bedside before the echoes had ceased.

"Yes, ma'am?" she said a little breathlessly. "You was a-wanting of me?"

"Martha," said Mrs. Morshead, "who is in the next room?"

"Lor, ma'am, no one! Who should there be?" was Martha's answer; but her heart ached when she met those wistful eyes, the secret desire of which she thought she read.

"Shut the door, then. And now go at once for my daughter," said Mrs. Morshead. "I dare say you know where she is, though her dying mother, whom she has deserted so cruelly, does not. You are all in a plot together, you hussies, and no one knows where to have you. But go for her, and tell her to come this very minute if she wants to see her mother alive in this world—which I dare say she does not. "Go, can't you!" she said savagely.

"Yes, ma'am," said Martha, disappearing.

In another instant Augusta, without her bonnet, came into the room and went noiselessly up to the bed.

"You want me, dear mamma?" she asked quietly.

"Oh! there you are, are you?" her mother said, keeping up the old sourness of her manner—yet her poor dim eyes brightened. "So you have condescended to come at last and see your dying mother, have you? And now, are you not ashamed of yourself when you see how ill I am?"

"What is it, dear mamma?" asked Augusta anxiously.

"Cancer," was the answer, made with the invalid's odd pride in the gravity of the malady. "Cancer; that's what I have; and you as hard and indifferent all the time as if it were a mere pinprick. And all those years when I knew it was coming, and when I had it, you not caring a jot! You ought to be ashamed of youself, if ever a daughter was," the poor old thing said, whimpering.

"I did not know. Remember, you never told me, dear mamma," said Augusta gently.

"Then you ought to have found out for yourself. Any other daughter would," said Mrs. Morshead, her tears of weakness struggling with her temper. "And here have you left me to the care of these hussies of servants, and no one to look after anything. All the housekeeping going wrong, the butchers' bills mounting up to goodness knows how much, the drawing-room fender and fireirons left to rust, and you, who ought to have been my right hand and seeing after everything, away no one knows where, enjoying yourself while

your mother was dying. It is a shame!—a shame!" she replied with fresh tears.

"Dear mamma, I have never left you," said Augusta softly. "I have been here all the time; watching in the dressing-room when Martha was downstairs; taking care of the house and keeping all things straight."

"You have stayed on here of your own free will after I ordered you out of my house?" asked Mrs. Morshead, opening her eyes on her daughter and half raising herself in her bed.

At this moment she looked terrible; like an ancient Fate, twin sister of death and sin, lying there for the persecution of mankind.

"How could I leave you when you were so ill? You were taken ill on the day you told me to go," said Augusta.

"And you stayed here of your own accord, against my orders?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Well, Augusta, I must say you are the very coolest young woman I ever met with," said Mrs. Morshead, with a curious kind of endeavour to keep up her anger against the promptings of her heart. "So, I am not mistress in my own house, am I not? I am not to be obeyed when I say that you and that troublesome little toad of yours are to go? You stay and stay and stay because I cannot see you, and disobey me as if I were a mere nobody;—upon my word—what next I wonder! And where is that little monkey of yours? And why, if you are here, have I never heard him?"

"I sent Tony away that he should not disturb you, mamma," said Tony's mother.

"And what business had you to send the poor fellow away?" snapped Tony's grandmother "If you chose to stay why might not he too?—with a nice garden to run about in and good food to eat? You are not a very kind mother, I must say, Augusta, to keep all these good things for yourself and let that dear little boy go without."

"I was afraid he would disturb you with his noise," said Augusta again.

"I should have liked his noise," said Mrs. Morshead. "I was never so impatient with him as you were. Poor fellow," whimpering afresh; "I should like to have seen his pretty face once more."

"Shall I send for him, dear mamma?" asked Augusta.

"Send for him now—what nonsense!" was the reply.

"Why should a dear little light-hearted child be brought to see an old wretch like me, like a death's-head? Send for him, no! Let things be." After a pause she asked, not opening her eyes, "Has that Sandy Kemp of yours been living here too? I should be surprised at nothing now."

"No," answered Augusta quietly.

"Where is he?—in Highwood?"

"Yes, mamma."

There was silence for a few moments, broken only by the subdued and sleepy purring of the cat lying in his accustomed place on the bed.

"Well, send for him," then said Mrs. Morshead, still without opening her eyes. "You are all mad and bad together. That's what I think of you. But you are no worse than your neighbours. With that little hussy, Hortensia Lyon, and that old fop, Mr. Branscombe, going to make a match of it, I may as well look over your fault. So send for that sign-painter of yours, Augusta, and let us hear what he has to say for his impudent self."

"He is downstairs now, mamma," said Augusta, her colour deepening as she spoke. "I saw him come up the garden a few minutes ago. He comes every day to ask for you."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Morshead in her old dry way; "does he? I'm vastly obliged to him, I am sure. I dare say the state of my health is of great interest to him. However, if he is here without leave he may as well come up with it. So send for him, Augusta. I want to give him a little piece of my mind."

Augusta said a few words to Martha, standing outside in the passage, and she went downstairs softly. Softly too came up Sandro Kemp; but when he entered the dimly-lighted room, with its wide open window and closely-drawn green blinds, the old woman was lying quiet and silent, her eyes closed, her breathing regular, peacefully asleep. The artist came up to her bed where Augusta was standing, and hand in hand they kept watch and ward over the frail and flickering life, waiting until the poor invalid should awaken. Her long and somewhat deep-drawn breathing was, as it were, echoed by the sensually satisfied purr of the cat at her feet; the clock ticked sharp and clear on the chimneypiece; out of doors only a few birds twittered in the shrubbery bushes; and the warm, still, sultry afternoon was as peaceful as if it had been itself the court of death.

For more than an hour the two stood there watching the sleep which they half expected would never turn to waking, when suddenly Mrs. Morshead opened her eyes and looked at them both with a smile.

"I have had such a nice dream," she said; "and I declare I have no pain, Augusta! All my pain has gone like magic!"

She spoke in quite a different voice from her ordinary one; weaker, lower, but without the usual acrimony.

"I am so glad you are so much easier, dear mamma," said Augusta lovingly.

"So you are there, Sandy Kemp?" then said the old woman, fixing her eyes on the artist. "Well! you are a bold fellow, I must say, to come and stare at me like this! But you always were as impudent as you were high. I wanted to see you through. So you are going to marry my daughter, are you?"

"I hope so, Mrs. Morshead," said Sandro gently.

"And you will make her a good husband?"

"I think I can say yes to that, without even the hope," he answered with a sweet grave smile.

"You will do well by the boy, poor fellow?"

"Yes; have no fear. He will be as my own son," was the reply.

"And you expect to get all my money? Not a farthing, Sandy Kemp! Not a farthing! I have made my will, and you will not have the benefit of a single silver sixpence. If you take the girl and her boy you take them on your own hands—mind that! The boy comes in for all when he is of age; but it has to accumulate—accumulate at compound interest—and you will not have a golden guinea for his schooling, or his birthdays, or anything. Now are you content with your bargain?"

The old woman had spoken very feebly, very slowly, but with perfect distinctness. Her mind was as clear as ever; only her body had gone.

"I am quite content, Mrs. Morshead. I have enough for my wife and her boy," said Sandro firmly but tenderly. "Your money was the last thing I had in my mind when I asked Augusta to be my wife; and I am glad that you have left all to her boy. He should have been my heir if he had not been yours."

"You are an impudent fellow to put us both on a par," said Mrs. Morshead sharply; "and remember, he takes my name.

He shall be no Latrobe, nor Kemp, nor rubbish of that sort. He is a Morshead; and he comes in for all because he is a Morshead. Do you hear, Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma. He shall bear your name and my father's," said Augusta.

"And keep that impudent sign-painter of yours in his proper place," said the old woman in a feeble wandering kind of way. Then she smiled and seemed to recollect herself. "No, he doesn't mean it, I dare say," she said. "I believe he is an honest man at bottom. I believe so—I believe so. Oh! this blessed freedom from pain!"

She seemed to doze a little on this, but presently she woke up again.

"Have I been a hard mother to you, Augusta?" she asked. "Sometimes I think I have been a little—have I?"

"You have been a little sometimes," answered Augusta, frankly but gently.

"And you would have been hard too, if you had had a wolf in your inside for years as I have had," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Then I have been a bad mother to you, Augusta?"

"No, not that, mamma."

"But hard and disagreeable—cross in fact—a peevish, scolding, cross old woman?"

"We will not think of that now," answered Augusta soothingly. "I have always loved you; and I have always known that underneath everything you have loved me."

"Yes," whimpered the poor creature pitifully; "I know that I have been bad to you. I know that I have, Augusta; and to that poor little boy, too. I rapped his pretty hands once when he had done no wrong. I know—I know. But I've made amends now; and I was always in pain, and no one knew. So perhaps you'll not mind now when you do know, for it was pain that was bad to bear. And I was hard to you too, Sandy Kemp; but I thought you came after my money as well as my daughter. Now it's over—so forgive me—forgive me," she sobbed. "Think of me gently when I'm gone!"

She said all this almost in a whisper, her glazing eyes turning slowly from each to each. Feebly she made as if to put her hands together; and when, divining her wish, they clasped them beneath hers, her dying fingers pressed them gently as a weak, wan smile flickered about her lips.

"Remember me gently when I am gone!" she said again

in a low whisper; "and pray God to forgive me my sins—and your own too," she added with one of her sudden, sharp looks—the last that ever she gave.

A long, dull silence fell on the room, broken only by the more laboured breath of the dying woman, the sleeping purr of the cat, the ticking of the clock, marking off the relentless pace of time. For the last time the old woman opened her eyes and looked up.

"Take care of Martha," she said. "The hussy has done well of me—and don't let the boy tease the cat."

Her eyes closed and a slight convulsive shiver seemed to run over her whole frame. Her breathing ceased; her jaw dropped; the last moment had come and gone. Then suddenly the cat started from his sleep, gave a loud unearthly yell, and, with his tail thick and arched, dashed off the bed and down the stairs as if pursued by a legion of fiends.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE NEW ORDERING.

No one's affairs excited so much attention or sympathy at this time at Highwood as Stella Branscombe's. Georgie Pennefather's engagement with Valentine Cowley came as a matter of course and made no stir. People said: "So she has caught him at last!" and there they left it. Augusta Latrobe's future marriage with Sandro Kemp had nothing in it to cause uplifted eyebrows, shrugged shoulders or ill-natured smiles. It was so eminently suitable that no one, save Colonel Moneypenny, had a word to say in its disfavour. But Hortensia Lyon and old Mr. Branscombe—a mere child and an old fellow who ought to have been thinking of his grave and what was to come after—that was another matter altogether; and one for which no person in the place had either sympathy or respect. Taken by itself even, who could have given a blessing to such a marriage? But when was added to this intrinsic unsuitability the thought of that poor, dear Stella, and what would become of her? and how could she be expected to get on with a stepmother younger than herself? and how shamefully she had been sacrificed throughout by that furred and frogged, curled and dyed and scented father of hers, first by her own marriage, and now by his—then the

world lifted its head and hissed in its own underhand and hypocritical way. That is, it congratulated Hortensia and her elderly idol to their faces and laughed at them, when it did not vilify them, behind their backs.

The marriage took place very soon after the engagement. Anticipation disturbed Mr. Branscombe's nerves, and he was impatient to begin his new life and to get all things in order. Wherefore he declined to wait for conventional arrangements. His sweet angel, his child-wife, his Little Love, he said, did not pin her heart on millinery pomp, and she would be as happy with three frocks as thirty:—"Happier," said Hortensia meekly:—And as, according to Mr. Branscombe, "frocks" are the great barriers to feminine speed in all matters, the decision of "one off, one on, and one to spare" settled the question; and the marriage was the great event of the day, just three weeks after that conversation on the garden-seat beneath the cedar-tree on the lawn.

During the honeymoon, which lengthened out into nearly three, nothing could exceed the kindness of the neighbourhood to Stella. Every one offered her a home, and she was made the spoiled child of the place. Augusta begged her to come to The Laurels—but then Ethel White was there, and Stella a little shrank from her; also she felt a little constrained with that sweet Augusta herself, remembering all the good advice that she had given her, and her warnings about the incoming tide, the full meaning of which she understood now though it was hidden from her then. So she said "No" to Augusta, and held on her way alone at Rose Hill.

Then the Pennefathers asked her; but Sherrardine was noisy, and the constant coming and going of Val might be an embarrassment. Wherefore Sherrardine would not do for a temporary home; nor would Derwent Lodge, though the Lyons were perhaps the most pressing of all. Mrs. Lyon had a vague idea of adopting Stella as their daughter in the place of the one who had left them; and she was unwise enough to say so. After she and her husband had pressed the girl to go back with them to Derwent Lodge, Mr. Lyon, in his hearty, hospitable way, meaning simply what he said: "To pass the time till the happy pair came home"—the still incensed and unreconciled mother burst into tears and added:

"Yes, come home with us, dear Stella, and make it your own. Be my daughter; for I have lost my own!"

But when she said this Mr. Lyon turned round on her and rebuked her sternly, saying :

"No, no, not that, Cara. The little maid has not perhaps made the marriage that I would have chosen for her, but children marry to please themselves, not their parents; and she has only done like the rest. We did the same ourselves in our day," he added significantly. "So, although I shall be as glad to see you, my dear child"—to Stella—"as if you were a princess, I cannot countenance any nonsense about your taking our little maid's place, or that we are daughterless now. She will be always our own and our dearest; and we cannot supply her place;—and have no need to."

In the face of all this, Stella wisely thought that going to Derwent Lodge would only complicate matters already too much involved for perfect peace; and that standing as a bone of contention between husband and wife was not exactly the happiest position in the world. Wherefore, this invitation was rejected with the rest; and the girl remained at Rose Hill with the feeling of one keeping close to an old friend about to be lost, or who at least will never be the same again.

But of all the offers of home and keep that made by Dr. Quigley was the oddest. He drove up to Rose Hill one day, to find Stella alone, as he had hoped and scarcely expected; for she was not left much to herself, and people were really very kind and rather worrying.

"Glad to see you and to find you alone," said the doctor, as he alighted from his dog-cart and came up to her as she sat reading on the lawn—but not on the seat underneath the cedar-tree. She had never sat there since the day when her father had kissed Hortensia Lyon in the face of day, and then presented her to her future stepmother. "Glad to find you alone," he repeated.

"Yes?" said Stella smiling, as she held out both her hands and looked into his face affectionately.

Dr. Quigley was a great favourite with her and she had always treated him as if he had been some sort of uncle.

"I want to make a proposal to you," he said, looking at her from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Yes?" she answered again, smiling.

The word might have been ominous to some ears; but Stella's were not sharp to detect echoes of a doubtful kind.

"I want to make a proposal," he repeated, watching her.

"What are you going to do when your father comes home with your young stepmother?"

"What am I going to do?" echoed Stella. "Nothing!"

"You will live at home?"

"Surely! What else can I do?"

"You can bear it?"

"It will be very painful at the first; but where can I go?" returned Stella.

"Come to me," said Dr. Quigley. "I have a sister who is much older than I—she will come and be your chaperon if you want one; but do you come to me as my daughter. Be my child. I was your mother's nearest friend. I knew of her what no one else did. She trusted me, and there was no one in the world, and never has been one, whom I have reverenced, admired, worshipped as I did her." His eyes filled with tears as he said this. He stopped for a moment, unable to speak for emotion. "And you are her child," he then went on to say; "and because you are her daughter you are as dear to me as my own. Will you leave this house of certain sorrow, Stella, and come to me as my own prized and cherished child—my daughter, and my sister's treasure?—for I know how dearly she will love you."

"Thank you—I cannot say how much I thank you," said Stella. tears in her eyes too; "but I could scarcely do that, dear Dr. Quigley. I feel your goodness more than I can express. but I could scarcely put such an affront on papa as to leave him and choose another father."

"Ah, well, child!—if you see it in that light I have no more to say," replied the doctor sadly. "I cannot force any one's conscience; and of course, as you say, taking another father is a different thing from taking a husband. That you could do without remorse. Have you no kind of liking for any young man here?" he asked, thinking of Randolph Mackenzie.

"No! no!" said Stella energetically, thinking of Valentine Cowley.

"And now answer me truly—and look me in the face when you speak, Stella Branscombe!—Is your heart where it was? Do you still love Cyril Ponsonby?"

Dr. Quigley spoke slowly, almost sternly. He spoke not as a pleader, but as an inquisitor who meant to come to the truth.

"Cyril Ponsonby does not love me," said Stella evasively.

The tears in her eyes were more expressive than her words.

"That is no answer. Women, God help them, poor fools! go on loving men long after they have ceased to be loved; and you are one of that sort. You love him still?" he asked again.

"I do not love any one else," she answered.

"You love him?" he persisted.

Stella was silent for a moment. Then she turned to the old friend who was torturing her for her own good, and said gently but frankly:

"Yes, I do."

"Ah!" said the doctor briskly; "now I know where I stand and what I have to do."

Upon which he took his leave in his usual hurried and imperative way, as if suddenly ordered off by some viewless commander whose behests he must obey at all cost and all hazards; leaving Stella plunged in wonder as to where he was standing and what he meant to do.

That pleasant honeymoon in the great art-centres of Europe could not be prolonged for ever, and the happy pair must perforce come home. It was an odd home-coming essentially, if on the surface of things everything was after the regulation pattern of bridal welcome. Flowers were set in pots along the carriage-drive, and flowers were set in vases in all the rooms; the gates and doors were thrown wide open; the servants, dressed in their Sunday best, stood waiting to welcome in the hall; Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, with Randolph Mackenzie and Stella, were at the hall-door, and all ran down the steps as the carriage drove up. Everything was as it should be; but, save in Mr. Lyon's embrace to his daughter, the heart was out of everything and it was just a mere raree-show in which no life nor soul nor meaning lay. Still, the look of things was as it should be; and no one has the right to go behind the look of things and inquire into the hidden spirit.

Mr. and Mrs. Lyon stayed to dinner; so did Randolph; and thus Stella was helped through the awkwardness of the first evening. It was only Stella who felt any awkwardness or who needed to be helped; for Hortensia was as calm and composed, as much at her ease and as much at home, as if she had been married in her cradle and had grown up on Finery Fred's knee. She was the same quiet, prim, unabashed little Puritan as ever: but she had added a certain—not sensual, but somewhat audacious—demonstration of affection which

set the teeth of all the onlookers on edge. She made as much love to her Precious Prince, as she now called her elderly idol, as if the two had been alone in their private apartments at the "Continental" or the "Grand;" and she made them all understand that henceforth her devotion to her husband would be not only supreme and undivided, but also aggressive;—that it would be flourished in their faces as an affront, a defiance to them in proportion to its intensity to him. And it was also evident that she would be jealous and exacting in all that she demanded from him, as a return for the exclusiveness of the affection given to him.

She manifestly intended to do the thing thoroughly throughout. As she had undertaken the position of an old man's wife, she would do what she could to sink her own childishness and ape the maturity which as yet she was so far from having attained. She had bought in London a large stock of wide-frilled and exaggerated "Charlotte Corday" caps, which covered all her hair and gave her the quaintest look of masquerade imaginable. She wore a very high ruff and a Marie Antoinette fichu; and, save in the exuberance of her idolatry for her husband—which, for all its excess, was wanting in all that sentiment which brings dew to the lip, a quiver to the eyelid, a blush to the cheek—in all that impulse of self-forgetfulness which is the crown of a woman's love — she was very prim and mortally staid and proper. Long ago she had abjured cakes and ale for her own part and had denied them to others—long ago she had set her seal against youthful follies of every kind—but she had drawn the bands of denial yet more closely since the day which had made her Finery Fred Brauscombe's wife, and in the dignity of her position found even laughter an anomaly and a jest reprehensible. How intensely dignified she was to all the outside world! and how intensely she was satisfied with, and glorified by, her new husband! Language seemed unable to express her delight in her elderly plaything, her joy in her conjugal doll. She could not bear to be absent from him, nor, when in his presence, to be separated by more than a few inches from his side. At the breakfast-table the Precious Prince had to leave his long-accustomed place at the foot of the table that he might sit close to her at the head—so close that she could touch his hand when she gave him his chocolate; put her slender fingers on his knee by way of hidden caress; butter his toast; take from his plate to her

own the bones of his fish, of his fowl; and turn so that she could look into his face across the angle of the table that came between them. At dinner she deserted her rightful place at the head that she might come down close to him at the foot—Stella sitting some way up the other side. In the studio she interrupted his work by her caresses, which however he did not resent—going back on what he had done as titles to honour of so much magnitude he need not repeat them, the time having come when he might rest on his laurels—but what laurels and what a rest! Though she interrupted and cut short his activities in a fashion too delightful for him to suppress, she did not damp his æsthetic ardour nor wound his artistic susceptibilities. She fed that restless craving, which he called his genius and those who knew him best his vanity, with food at once rich, sweet, delicate—food eminently suited to his taste, and by which he was exhilarated and made content. The whole thing ran on casters and stood on velvet; and the young wife's marriage crown of roses had but one thorn—and that thorn was Stella.

If only Stella would find herself a husband and take herself away! Why could she not? What a wicked, disobedient, tiresome girl she was to have refused Valentine Cowley! —and why on earth should she not marry Randolph Mackenzie? He was just suited to her. He had not a poetic idea in his head, nor had she; and they would go through life in the most admirable harmony of earthworminess and intellectual vacuity. Why not Randolph? Why not, indeed!

In their wish to free themselves from the somewhat embarrassing presence of the daughter, both husband and wife agreed to a line; and Randolph got the good of the situation. He was almost as much at Rose Hill now as in the days of his secretaryship; and Stella, who was indeed stupid in these things, saw neither the designs of the authorities nor the feelings of the poor fellow himself. She only knew that it was pleasant to have her Brother with her so constantly, and that it was dull when she was left so very much alone.

For, in the house, she was always alone—cut off as completely from her father as if she were living in a brazen tower where she only saw him in the evening walking in the garden below. Hortensia could not bear to have her in the same room with them. It seemed to take that marriage crown of roses from her brow and to reduce her once more to plain

Hortensia Lyon, here on sufferance and holding only the second place with her beloved idol. If Stella came into the studio in the morning, as at first she did and until better taught, her youthful stepmother, sitting close to the domestic Apollo whose bays she had renewed so lavishly, would lift her head from his shoulder and say in her prim way:

"Dear Stella, this place does not suit you. Dr. Quigley said so, if you remember. Precious Prince, don't you think Stella had better not stay? The atmosphere suits *us;* but then she is not like *us*—is she?"

On which Finery Fred, who wanted his daughter no more than did Hortensia, would smile blandly and smooth his wife's silky hair and say to Stella, not looking at her:

"My dear Stella, Mrs. Branscombe is quite right. The atmosphere here of art, flowers and perfume does not suit you; why attempt it, my dear child?"

When the two went out it was always together and Stella was left behind. Hortensia would say:

"I do not think it would look well, dear Stella, if you came with us to-day. We are going to pay a return call"—here or there—"and it would scarcely do for you to be with us. It makes it awkward for me, such a great girl as you are now!" she sometimes added with an indescribable air of superior maturity, as if she had been a pretty wife of about thirty and Stella a lanky hoyden of sixteen, say.

So, on the days when they went to pay their return calls, or when they wanted to walk by themselves and gain inspiration, or when they had business in the town, or liked better than anything else to stay in the house, or to lounge about the garden, or to take a brisk ride deep into the country—that is, every day save Sunday—the elderly husband and his youthful wife were "in each others' pockets" as the Pennefathers said, and Stella was left alone—or with Randolph Mackenzie.

There was another change in the girl's relations with her father which cut her to the heart; he had entirely left off kissing her. Since his first cold embrace on their homecoming, he had never touched even her forehead nor suffered her to touch his. It made his child-wife, his little angel, unhappy; and he respected her scruples of delicacy and exclusiveness. Wherefore he merely put out two fingers when he wished his former Star good night and good morning; and Hortensia did not do even this.

Times were indeed changed for Stella!—and it was difficult to learn her new place and to remember her lessons. One evening when the three were sitting with Randolph Mackenzie, in the drawing-room—paired off as but little more than a year ago the father and mother, the lover and his betrothed, had been paired—Stella rang the bell.

"Why did you ring?" asked Hortensia, pulling the corners of her lips together.

"For a glass of water," said Stella simply. "A glass of water, if you please, Jones," she said, as the man came into the room; but Hortensia's tones over-ruled hers, as she too said in a decided and staccato kind of voice:

"Jones! a glass of water for Miss Branscombe."

When the water had been brought and the man had come and gone, Hortensia turned to her cousin.

"Randolph, it is time for you to go," she said in a quiet, prim way. "It is half-past nine."

"Yes, Hortensia—I mean Mrs. Branscombe," stammered Randolph, who had been strictly tutored but who never remembered. "I did not know that it was so late."

"I think my good Mr. Randolph knows very little of anything at any time," said Mr. Branscombe with a lofty kind of smile—Prospero magnanimously refraining from torturing Caliban but never forgetting his brutish inferiority.

Randolph coloured.

"I know I am stupid, Mr. Branscombe," he said awkwardly.

"Never mind being stupid," said Stella naïvely. "You are good."

"What an extraordinary thing to say!" said Hortensia, putting on her most Puritanical air. "I am Randolph Mackenzie's cousin, almost like his sister, and I never paid him an open compliment like that!"

"It is not a compliment, it is the truth," answered Stella.

"Come! it is time for you to go, Mr. Randolph. Have you not heard Mrs. Branscombe's desire?" put in Mr. Branscombe impatiently. "How long do you wish to detain your young friend, my dear Stella, for the pleasure of making pretty speeches to him? Will they not keep till to-morrow?"

"Yes, papa, quite well," said Stella a little defiantly.

It was not her dear papa whom she defied but the thought

of Hortensia which spoke through his lips, the spirit of this mischievous usurper who used that majestic form and face as her mask.

"Good night!" then said Randolph hurriedly; he was sorry to hear Stella rebuked for him—but how sweet the occasion! Good? she thought him good? Would she? Could she ever be brought to cling to him as to her safeguard, her protector, her lover? Oh! how he would protect her, how he would care for her!—and Cyril, who had renounced her, wished that he had been her choice! Would it ever come? Heaven in its mercy grant it! Dear stars shining above, send down sweet influences into her heart! All good angels, all blessed spirits breathe the thought into her heart and guide her wish to meet his prayer!

Never since he was born had Randolph felt as he felt to-night, when walking home to his uncle's house. He did not know himself, nor life, nor thought, nor desire. One with the starry night, yet longing for the sunny day—glad in the peace, in the sleeping stillness, of nature, yet yearning for the flush and flow of her activities—blessed in the actual moment, but looking forward to to-morrow—the present and the future both had a different meaning for him from what either ever had before; and love wrought in his dull soul the great miracle of transformation—from a clod evolving a poet, out of clay striking the divine fire of inspiration. He seemed to tread on air as he walked along, and to move as if in some rainbow-coloured dream. The sharp night wind of early autumn was like great draughts of wine which stirred his blood and peopled his brain with glorious visions of saints and angels, of fair gardens and stately palaces;—all because a pale and sad-eyed girl had said he was good and had been rebuked for her advocacy, which yet she had not withdrawn. Oh Love! oh Love! king and magician—god and demon—the wind that blows over the harp of the human heart—the sun-rays which colour the clouds:—and we—what are we but poor fools in your great court, shaped, blessed and broken according to your own supreme will!

And now had come Hortensia's domestic opportunity for final and decisive self-assertion. She had been waiting for it; and it had come at last. So soon as the door had shut on Randolph Mackenzie she very quietly unhooked from her châtelaine the master-key which represented her authority in the house and her mistresshood. With a meek air of solemn

renunciation she laid it on the little table beside Mr. Branscombe's glass of "eau sucrée à fleur d'orange."

"Dear Stella," she said—she was generally careful to add the "dear" when she called the girl by her name—"Dear Stella, I wish you to take the housekeeping. I do not care to have it if it makes you unhappy. I have your precious father; and he is all the world to me. But if I am to be mistress I must be sole mistress. We cannot have two ringing the bell and ordering the servants. It must be you or I —one or the other—but not both. Am I not right, Precious Prince?"

"Certainly, Little Love; one must be at the head of affairs. That is only logical," was Mr. Branscombe's answer.

"But is there anything against your authority in my asking, in my own home, the servant whom I can remember ever since I was born, to bring me a glass of water?" said Stella rather warmly.

"He is *my* servant now," answered Hortensia; "and pray, dear Stella, do not lose your temper at such a very small observation. I feel it due to your dear father, far more than to myself, to keep my proper place and prevent encroachments. But where is the need of getting into a passion about it? You lose your temper so soon, dear Stella!"

"I do not think you can say that, Hortensia," said Stella hastily.

"And, dear Stella," Hortensia continued in her quiet monotonous hard voice; "I wish you would not call me plain Hortensia, just as when we were girls together. I do not care for myself, of course; but I do not think it is respectful to your father—whose wife I am. In respecting me you respect him, and the contrary. If you do not like to call me mamma"—"No!" flashed out Stella, "I will never do that!"—"at least call me Mrs. Branscombe," continued Hortensia in the same smooth quiet way as before. How that wicked Stella longed to shake her! "I may be young to be your stepmother; and of course you are a great girl now and grown up, and you may not like to have me here as the mistress and your precious father's wife; but it was his will, and that ought to be sacred to you. Am I not right, Precious Prince?" she added as her peroration, turning her adoring eyes on her husband.

"My Little Love is always right," returned Finery Fred, with a dash of uneasiness in his manner. "And Stella, my

dear child," he added, steadying himself into the semblance of grave displeasure—but why? "you will find your best happiness as your best policy in respect for my wife and in attention to what she desires."

"I am to understand then, that I am not to ring the bell, here in my own home, nor ask the servant to even bring me a glass of water without your permission?" said Stella, she too speaking quietly so far as manner went, but her heart within on fire.

"Not in my presence," answered Hortensia. "I am the mistress, and I must be treated as the mistress."

"And as for calling you Mrs. Branscombe—yes, I will, with pleasure," Stella went on to say, her colour rising, her eyes darkening, her voice deepening. "I would call you anything, Hortensia, that should best express the unfathomable gulf there is between us and the infinite wrong that you have done me!"

"Precious Prince, protect me!" cried Hortensia, flinging herself into her husband's arms and bursting into tears. "Now you see what I have to endure!" she added, sobbing.

"Stella, apologize to my wife," said Mr. Branscombe sternly.

"Never!" said Stella, rising and facing her father. "It is she who has done me the wrong, not I who have injured her. I will not apologize, papa!"

"Then leave the room," said Mr. Branscombe, whom the tears of his Little Love distressed as much as his former Star's wicked temper and contumacy annoyed. "Leave the room, and do not let me see your face again till you have come to a better frame of mind, and can recognize both your blessings and your superiors."

So down with a crash went another cardboard Temple of Love; and the warrant of poor Stella's disinheritance from her father's affection was finally and definitely signed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE.

The next morning, when Randolph came up to Rose Hill as usual, he saw that something had happened to gravely disturb Stella—Stella, always his radiant Star, how much soever she might have paled for others.

The excitement of the foregoing night was still upon the faithful soul for whom Mr. Branscombe, as Prospero, could find no simile so exact as that of Caliban. He felt as if he bore in visible characters about him the words of his great desire, his fervent thought, and, by dint of desiring and thinking, his fragrant hope. As he walked along the road that led to Rose Hill, he felt as if he were coming to the term of his present career and to the opening of a new life. But when he saw Stella's face, pale and mournful as in the days when love had been at war with duty and Cyril's was the one name to which she dare not give utterance, then his heart died within him; and yet it did not die. Only himself and all his own great hope and yearning sank into the background, and how he could best make her happy was the guardian sentinel of all the rest.

"What is the matter, dearest Stella?" he said, as he took both her hands in his, in his deep love and faithful sympathy forgetting to be formal and conventional.

"Randolph, I am just broken-hearted," she said. "You must help me; you must tell me what I am to do. I am too wretched as things are—it is impossible to go on like this; but I am bewildered, and do not know where to turn for help."

"I am glad you have come to me. What is it?" he said again, simply but earnestly.

How his heart beat! Why did she leave her hands in his? Did she feel the spirit that ran through his blood, as a song not yet born into sound flows in unspoken melody through the brain?

"I will tell you, and then you can judge," she answered—poor miserable Stella! with her somewhat prosaic sorrows created by feminine jealousy and girlish littleness as her answer to his poetic exaltation, his divine fire!

And on this she told him of what had happened last night after he had left; of the coldness like death existing between her and her father; of how Hortensia had come between them so that things would never be right again; and of how it was impossible for her, Stella, to remain at home in the false and humiliating position to which her young stepmother had doomed her.

"You cannot stay," said Randolph in a low voice. "You must leave, Stella, for your own sake, your own self-respect."

"I know I must," she answered; "but where can I go?

What can I do? It would be such an affront to papa if I went out as a companion or a governess! And I could not live with any one here. When I go I must go quite away."

"You must," echoed Randolph—"quite away."

All this time he had been holding her hands in his, she scarcely knowing that he was doing so, but only conscious of a certain sense of friendly sympathy and protection, of a certain tender brotherliness which made the sadness of the moment less intolerable.

"Stella," he then said, his voice low and sweet as a song, his face transformed from its usual clumsy goodness and dog-like devotion into the face of a man of full purpose, resolute, impassioned, and raised by love to the dignity of self-assertion, to the majesty of manhood; "dear Stella, come with me. Give me the right to care for you, to love you, to protect you, to make you happy. I do not ask you to love me—not yet—only to let me love you and work for you; to keep you from all harm and to make you as happy as the devotion and respect of my life can make you. You are the only woman I have ever loved, and if I could make your life happy I should ask nothing more of fate or fortune."

That softened voice, those pleading eyes, that earnest face! —and the true good loyal heart within which these but faintly expressed! Stella looked up at him, her own eyes dark and humid; her own face full of emotion; but alas! not of the kind that matched his.

"Oh, Randolph! Randolph! I am so sorry!" she said, bending towards him in pure sweet pity. "I never dreamt of such a thing—I did not see nor suspect it. You are just to me my own dear, dear brother, and I had no idea that I was more to you. What can I do! what can I say! I am so sorry, so grieved, but I could not marry you, dear. It would be impossible!—it would be sacrilege!"

"Why?" he asked, his ruddy face as pale as the white hand which he still held in his own.

"You are my brother," she said evasively.

"There is no law against such a brotherhood as mine becoming something nearer and dearer," pleaded Randolph with more acuteness than he generally displayed.

"But I could not," she answered.

"Tell me straightly why, Stella—Star of all the earth to me," said Randolph. "Is it because you do not love me?—only because you do not love me?"

She looked down, her face full of distress.

"Or is it," he continued, his voice grave and steady, no longer low and musical but like the voice of one to whom truth is dearer even than love; "is it because you still love Cyril?"

Stella turned away her head.

"He no longer loves me," she said; then she looked up into Randolph's face; "but I do still love him," she added, with a kind of spiritual self-abandonment, as flattering in its own way, if less satisfactory, than if she had confessed that she loved him himself. "I cannot help it, Randolph! I know that it is mean-spirited, weak, unwomanly, horrid, but I do love him! I do!" she repeated fervently. "And never to the end of my life could I love any one else!"

"Then all is said," answered poor Randolph sadly, and yet how noble in his sadness, how heroically unselfish, how grand in his self-suppression! "I could not even beseech you to love me, if your heart is still with Cyril. But you must always let me be your brother, Stella, and you must forget all that I have said. It was just the madness of the moment; and you must make use of me as if I were really the own brother you feel me to be. Will you promise this, dear? You do not know how I can keep back what it would be unworthy, as well as unwise, to encourage. You will never see anything more in me than you have hitherto, if only you will love me as your best friend, your true brother."

He still kept her hands and bent forward, looking into her face. All the inspiration, the fervid poetry, the ecstatic dream, the grand awakening from the earth-bound poverty of his daily life had gone. He was once more only the humble guardian, the faithful watch-dog, the devoted friend, the unselfish, loyal and protecting brother, the incorruptible lieutenant guarding the captain's treasure; he was once more Brother Randolph, and the sudden, swift, illumination had passed as if it had never been.

"Promise to give me back your trust and sisterly love," he said, tears in his eyes.

"Yes," said Stella fervently. "I believe in you, Randolph, as I believe in the day, and I trust you as I trust my own soul."

"Thank you; and God bless you," said Randolph, lifting her pale thin hands to his lips, and kissing them as a devotee might have kissed the shrine of his god.

But all this had not answered Stella's latest questions: What was she to do? and Where was she to go?

When Randolph went back to Derwent Lodge he found a telegram waiting for him there—a telegram which had exercised his aunt Cara greatly and made her as terrified as people who live in the country are generally made by these swift and mysterious messengers. He opened it, and found that the sender was Cyril Ponsonby; the place, London; the date, that very day. It was concise and peremptory, saying simply: "Come up at once. You will find me at the club;" leaving him in a fog as to all the rest:—Why Cyril had come back so suddenly from India; why he wanted to see him, Randolph; and what it was to be the upshot of all this strange confusion. He could but obey the summons of his friend; and without even sending a message to Stella, he flung his things into his portmanteau and just caught the up-train, without half a minute to spare.

It was late when he got to London, but mindful of his duty as lieutenant and friend, he drove straight to the rendezvous appointed. He found Cyril, with his hat over his eyes, sitting in the reading-room, pretending to be interested in the dullest newspaper on the table and not seeing a word of what he looked at.

"At last!" said Cyril, drawing a deep breath as Randolph entered. "God bless you, old fellow! I knew that I could count on you."

"To the death," said Randolph below his breath. Aloud he only answered: "Of course. What brings you over, old man?" then asked Pylades, looking wistfully at the grave, changed, melancholy face of the once careless, happy boy.

How the character of it had altered! How all the laughter had turned to stern decision; all the gaiety to grave intensity!—how utterly the boy had died, and with what mournful power the man had risen from his ashes!

"Stella!" said Cyril.

Randolph felt his own face grow pale, but he neither winced nor shrank. It was the hour of his ordeal and he had to go through with it to the end.

"Yes? and why?" he answered, his light blue eyes raised straight and calm into his friend's face.

"Both Ethel White and old Quigley have written to me," said Cyril. "And both have told me to come home and see Stella. But I cannot believe in any one as I believe in you,

old fellow—you will tell me the truth. What is the truth, Ran? Does Stella still love me, or am I wanted by the friends as a kind of pis-aller against her father? I know that Val Cowley is engaged to the Pennefather girl, so there is no truth in that report; but I am sore, Ran, and suspicious, and do not see my way. I loved that girl. God! yes, I loved her!" he said.

He turned away his head, then crossed his arms on the table and laid his face upon them, trembling.

"And she loves you," said Randolph in a steady voice, laying his hand on Cyril's shoulder. "She has never wavered, Cyril. When all sorts of reports came down she stuck to you in public as well as private, and refused to believe a word to your disfavour. Go down to her, old man. You will find her where you left her."

Not a chord in the clear voice shook; not a muscle of the honest face changed. His strong heart was braced to sacrifice, and the holocaust was offered up without failing or wavering.

"Is this true, Ran? God's own truth?" cried Cyril lifting up his face.

"True as the sun in the sky," said Randolph. "There is no purer lovelier soul in Christendom than Stella Branscombe; and she loves you."

Cyril held out his hand to his friend, and the two exchanged one of those silent pressures which mean more than words to men.

"Thank you," he said simply. "I know that I have to thank you!"

"No," said Randolph frankly; "you have to thank her alone. I love her as much as you do, Cyril; but she loves you only. And now good-bye; you have no time to lose. The night-train will take you down in time for breakfast, and she is too good to be kept longer in suspense. Good-bye, old fellow; and good luck."

"But you—when shall I see you again?" said Cyril anxiously.

A sad kind of smile came over Randolph's face.

"That is rather uncertain," he said. "I am off to New Zealand by the next mail, and do not see my way back to England again just yet. But I must not keep you. Hurry up, and God bless you."

Once more the two young men clasped hands; and then

Randolph Mackenzie passed out into the distance and the night, never more to cross the platforms of those lives which he had helped to bless at the expense of his own.

Was it a good omen or a bad that Cyril should have chosen that very carriage over the window of which, more than a year ago now, he had scrawled, out of the very exuberance of his happiness and hope: "My Love! My Love!"? "My Love!" —How it thrilled him with a strange sense of presage when he first caught those graven words and remembered all the glad folly of the hour! Was it the word of the past done with and dead? or was it the earnest of the future linking itself on to the past? Randolph had assured his success; and Randolph never lied. It was surely for good—a prophecy of safety, an omen of success. Much as he had learned to doubt, little as he now suffered himself to hope or to trust, this time the old spirit conquered the new lessons. Yes, it was an omen for good; and he fairly laughed aloud as he drew his diamond ring from his finger—*her* ring which he had not returned and which until now had never left his hand—and scrawled a big Star in the corner of the pane. Then he added the date; and his voice went up like a prayer—"My Love! My Love!"

The Branscombe family were at breakfast when he arrived at Rose Hill, just as on that bright May morning when the accepted lover, the glad son of the house, had come down to his own, full of that confident assurance which has gone past the stage of hope. Now, as then, he had sent on no word of warning, no avant courier, either of demand or prayer. He trusted all to the revelation of the moment, to the truth made manifest by the unprepared confession of surprise. It was a risk in more ways than one, and thoughtless as regarded Stella; but he did not wait to think; and so, without warning or previous notice, he came into the room—Jones opening the door and saying: "Mr. Ponsonby," as if the lad had been here only yesterday and was fully expected to-day.

Stella started to her feet and turned to him, but without moving. She only said, in a breathless kind of way:

"Cyril, have you come at last?"

But one look in his eyes was enough. The sad face of the bronzed, mournful, bearded man was the face of him who had loved her as a boy and who loved her now as much as then. The honest eyes, less glad than they were a year ago, were still as frank and truthful, as candid, as sincere, and still the

eyes of one who could neither lie nor feign. The hands held out to her were as strong to hold, the arms which clasped her close to that throbbing heart, ran with blood as warm and loyal as in the days gone by. The voice which said "My Love! My Love!"—the lips which kissed hers there in the sight of prim Hortensia, to whom only her own kisses were virtuous—of elegant Mr. Branscombe, to whom he was but an earthworm and a clod—those lips were as loving as before, as faithful as were her own. What need of explanation? Who wanted assurance? All was told and all was known. They loved each other now as they had loved each other then; and the clouds which had risen between them were swept away for ever now when the great sun-god Love shone on them once again. The bonds which had been broken were reunited; and the checked fountain of joy sprang up from the barren sands where it had been lost—laughing in the sun as it rose.

Mr. Branscombe looked at Hortensia for a lead. His Little Love had her hand on the silken rein, and the finest, smallest, most invisible but most inflexible silver hook was in the nostrils of the great autocrat. She looked back at him, understanding his appeal and taking in the whole situation at a glance.

"How glad I am!" she said smiling as she bent her head to his, speaking in an audible whisper. "Dear Stella! she has deserved her happiness. This is the marriage of all others for her! How wise she has been to see it! Don't you think so, Precious Prince?"

"Yes, Little Love. I have always wished it—always desired it," said Mr. Branscombe with graceful acquiescence, stately and jocund in one.

He turned to Cyril, and, just as in olden times, held out two long white scented fingers, with their filbert-shaped nails so delicately pared and daintily polished. He did not even rise from his seat. The Son of the House was beyond these small formalities, and paternal familiarity was the better welcome.

"Ah, Cyril, dear boy, good morning!" he said, exactly as if he had seen him over night, with no excitement, no surprise, no questioning as to how or why he had so suddenly appeared. "Jones, a plate for Mr. Ponsonby. What will you have, my dear boy? I can recommend those kidneys à la Soubise; and young appetites are generally sharp-set. By the way,

first let me present you to Mrs. Branscombe. I think you knew her in olden days?"

"Yes," said Cyril, shaking hands with Hortensia; but for the life of him he could not be cordial either to her or to her husband.

"This is the only change you will find in your old home," continued Mr. Branscombe airily. "All else just the same! Stella as good a girl as ever and as devoted to you; I, as much your friend and as glad to see you as before; my wife your firm and constant champion:—only a year has passed since last we met—a year which has left us all, I trust, with an added increment of wisdom, happiness and health. Now, my dear boy, attack those kidneys while they are hot else they will lose half their flavour: and Stella, my good child, pass your future husband the toast!"

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